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ALL SORTS

BY

I. A. R. WYLIE

AUTHOR OF "THE RAJAH'S PEOPLE," "THE DUCHESS IN PURSUIT," ETC.

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I

HOLY FIRE

I

THE voice filled the stillness as an organ fills a vast and empty cathedral. It rolled out over the wide and misty fields. It rose sonorously into the pale dome of the morning.

" . . . for the abundance of the fruits of the earth and for peaceful times, let us beseech the Lord ! "

The two peasants answered " Lord have mercy upon us ! " They were sturdy and heavy-browed, and in their dull coloured blouses they seemed part of the patient earth which murmured under their tread. But the white-bearded priest who towered between them was a mighty man. His shoulders were broad and terribly strong, and the deep-set eyes were brilliant as a hawk's. His golden vestments shone in the early sunlight; they threw a radiance about him as he moved.

" . . . let us beseech the Lord ! " he chanted splendidly.

They went on down the long furrow. The censer clashed softly as it swung to and fro, and a sweet-scented cloud mingled with the quiet air. Behind them the sower kept solemn pace, flinging out a rhythmic hand and a shower of seed over the blessed soil. At first there seemed nothing

else but these four figures moving up and down the furrows—no other sound but the priest's voice and the crunch of the earth under his feet. As the sun threw off its misty morning veil the endless space was broken by little things—by a river that was wide and swift and treacherous, and yet flowed between its steep red banks like a silver thread. And a village, a toy village, thrown down by a careless child, lay scattered amidst the fields; and a tiny church, glistening white, bravely lifted its bright green cupolas an inch or two nearer God. From an invisible belfry a sheep bell tinkled.

In the flat, tireless immensity, and under the empty vaulted sky, these were just little things.

But the priest was like a moving column of gold, and his voice was like the voice of the impregnated earth itself.

“ . . . for this land, and for the fruits that it shall bear, and for those faithful, who in due course shall partake of them, let us beseech the Lord . . . ”

They came at last to the road. It was broad and the deep ruts that lay half-hidden under the brown dust made hard travelling. Yet it was a wonderful road. It led to another village fourteen versts away, and beyond that again to the horizon—to Warsaw—to the end of the earth—to the end of unending Russia. When the villagers crossed it going to their fields they were wont to stop a moment, and their eyes would travel along its length to the horizon. It troubled and menaced them. They feared and loved it, as a child fears and loves fairy enchantment. It was life—unresting, dangerous and lonely, for ever seeking, for ever pressing forward towards the unknown.

The priest's voice died into silence. He, too, was looking along the road, and the hawk's eyes had the rapt, mystic look of youth. A puff of wind arose and blew the long hair to a silver aureole about his head,

"God has been good to us," he said. "He has heard our prayer. We have had peace. Our good soil has not suffered. The enemy has not come——"

"May God curse him!" the elder of the two men answered bitterly. "God curse him!"

The priest shook his head.

"Sin is God's curse. We must pray for God's blessing on our enemy, Dmitri."

"Yes, Holy Father, that is so."

But they were puzzled. He made the sign of the Cross over the uncovered heads, and went his way, and they gazed after him wonderingly. Though they did not understand his words, they knew that they were righteous. He was not like the priest of the neighbouring village who drank and blasphemed. He was pitying and just to others, and to himself merciless. He was a good man.

Dmitri uncrossed his hands.

"So now we must pray for our enemy, brother," Ivan nodded stolidly.

"Yes. The Holy Father is right. We must pray."

They went back over the fields to the sower, who sang, as he flung his seed to the hungry furrows:—

"Over Holy Russia the cocks are crowing.
Soon the dawn will come to Holy Russia."

II

The day was wide awake when the priest reached the village. The doors of the untidy wooden houses stood open and women's faces peered out at him. A knot of fair-haired children, who tumbled about the street in pursuit of an errant pig, stood still and gazed solemnly but without fear. He smiled at them, and raised his hand in blessing. But now he seemed less big, less terribly strong,

The full sunlight fell unkindly on the golden vestments, and showed up stains and faded, tarnished threads and the dust about the hem. Once they had been really splendid ; but that was long ago, when the priest had been young and ardent and full of hope. He had stood in his new vestments before the altar, and the people had looked at him as at a vision. Now only in the tender dawn, or in the dim twilight of his church did he reach up again to that first splendour. In the hard, garish daylight he was just an old man making his way wearily homewards along a squalid street in a poverty-stricken village, where none of the wonderful things he had dreamed of had ever happened. He knew now that they would never happen. He himself had grown dim and shabby.

A little old woman came down the street towards him. She was bent almost double under her invisible burden, and the faded eyes that peered so anxiously into the sunlight were wide and blank. A child led her, but when he saw who it was who came to meet them he flung off the clutching bony hand and ran like a young hare and caught the old priest by the gold cloak with irreverent, grubby fingers.

"Dyed ! Dyed !" he cried in his shrill boy's soprano, and looked up, laughing and afraid and triumphant all in one.

But the old woman stood alone and helpless, tapping about her with her stick and muttering piteously.

The priest lifted the boy and kissed him on each ruddy cheek.

"That was wrong, Stefan. See how you have frightened her ! That was not kind."

"She is so slow !" The child pressed close, panting and eager. "Granny is so slow. She said I was to find you, and I have found you, haven't I, Dyed ? So you musn't

let her scold me. And besides, I couldn't wait—father has written!" He drew his round face into comical lines of importance. "The schoolmaster read the letter to her—and they both cried," he said.

The priest set the boy down again. He went to the old woman and took her hand, and as he touched her the wrinkled, troubled face lit up with an inward fire, and the sunken mouth had an odd, tremulous sweetness.

"Is that you, Michael Gregorovitch?"

"Yes, wife, it is I. Stefan saw me and ran to fetch me. He did not mean to leave you. He was excited—he said you had had a letter."

"Yes—yes, from Alexis—our son." She turned her head away. "Boris Andrief read it to me—and then I, too, could not wait."

"He is well—Alexis?"

"I do not know."

"Yet he wrote——"

"It was not a letter—not an ordinary letter. It did not come by the Government. A soldier brought it. He belongs to a village near by. And he was wounded and they sent him home. Alexis had given him the letter——" Her voice quavered and broke. "Father, we shall not see our son again!" she wailed.

He looked down at her. She was old and broken. He had a sudden vision of her as she had been years back, when she had carried Alexis in her arms. He saw her in a frame of green foliage, laughing at him, her eyes bright and her cheeks ruddy as apples. He felt his own hands tremble with the years as he lifted them in protest.

"Why do you say that, wife? Why shall we not see him again?"

"They came!" she whispered, and now the sentences

flew from her shaking lips. "They came to his village, and they killed and killed and killed. They burnt down his church. And he took off his priest's dress, and he shaved his hair, and dressed himself in the uniform of a dead soldier. He was not a priest any more, Father. He went with the armies of Russia——"

The old man drew himself up.

"He did wrong. He sinned. He was a priest. He belonged to God."

"Father, they killed women and children——"

"He could have prayed for them—as God bade him."

The little Stefan clapped his hands.

"I would rather be a soldier than a priest. I am glad my father is a soldier. Priests can only pray. Soldiers can kill wicked people."

"Soldiers put out the light that God kindled," was the answer. "A priest keeps the lamp fed."

The little Stefan stood still a moment, pensive.

"Like the lamp, before the altar, Dyed?"

"Yes, like the lamp, before the altar."

They went on slowly, little Stefan between them, holding their hands and kicking up the dust with his bare feet. But even he was sobered. Something had happened; the hands that held his trembled, and on his grandfather's face was a strange look. The something that had happened was worse than anything the little Stefan had ever known—worse, even, than when they had come to fetch his mother, who lay so still and silent in her long, narrow box.

At the bottom of the street stood the priest's house and the white church. The priest's house was no different from all the other houses in the street—sordid and broken down; but the church sparkled in the bright sunlight like a crown of diamonds. And the four green cupolas were like great shining emeralds.

The priest stopped, still holding little Stefan by the hand.

"I was growing old," he said, "but now I must be young again. I waited for Alexis. But he will never come. It will be many years before Stefan can take my place."

The old woman's ghostly hands were clasped piteously.

"But you will pray for him, Father—you will pray for Alexis?"

"I pray for all men."

"He was our son:"

"He has thrown aside his heritage."

"He did right," she cried fiercely.

"God will judge."

"He has judged," she almost screamed. "Our son is dead!"

The priest crossed himself with a steady hand.

"It is God's will."

"Will you not curse those who killed him?"

"No, no, wife. I can't do that."

"Is that all you say, Michael Gregorovitch? They call you a good man—they say that God loves you because you are so good; but I say that you are bad—I say that you are hard and pitiless." She clung to him with frantic hands. "No, no, it is not true. Don't leave me—where are you going? Don't leave me."

He freed himself tenderly.

"The lamp must be trimmed before vespers, dear wife. Stefan shall come with me so that he shall see how it is done and why, and then when his time comes he will understand."

So they went on together, and the old woman stood alone by the door, listening to the fading footsteps—to the big, firm tread and the childish patter. And the tears rolled

down from the blank eyes, and fell on the folded, withered hands.

And little Stefan looked back along the sunny road and whimpered.

"I want to play—I'd rather play robbers with Ivanovitch. I hate the lamp. What does the lamp matter?"

III

But inside the church little Stefan did not whimper any more. It was always like that. Outside in the sunshine he might be laughing, or crying, or quarrelling, but once the black wooden doors closed behind him, he would grow still as a mouse, and stare with big, solemn eyes, and cross himself like a small saint. The church was so full of shadow. High up in the plain white walls were two little windows, which threw a hushed twilight over the emptiness. For there was nothing splendid and wonderful in the church, no relics, no fine altars, or shining gold mosaic. The stone floor had been worn smooth by generation after generation of villagers. The old Dyed himself had been young once and had stood where little Stefan stood, and had stared awestruck as his father had done before him, and so on—right back into the dimness of things. Once the paintings on the wooden ikonostasis, which separated the Holy of Holies from the congregation, had been bright with colour. But now, one could hardly recognise the saintly figures that they represented. Stefan knew that St. Mark stood on the left, and St. Nicholas on the right, because Dyed had told him so, but they were pale as dreams.

Only one thing had never changed.

A lamp burnt before the altar. It hung by a chain from the vaulted roof, and its red light fell on the pale,

tender face of the sacred ikon. From where little Stefan stood he could only see its reflection rising above the closed doors of the screen, like the afterglow of the sun when it has gone down behind the end of the earth. But when the doors were thrown open he saw the lamp itself.

For two hundred years it had burnt there. Two hundred years, night and day. The world outside had gone on along its mysterious road; men had loved and killed one another; great wonders had been revealed to them; there had been revolutions and wars; victors and vanquished had poured through the village, and their dead lay beneath the church's cross. But in the church itself nothing had changed. The shadows were realities. At night they grew blacker and stronger, but night and day they were there—servants of the red lamp, whose flame burnt up to God in unceasing worship. Two high brass candlesticks kept guard at the entrance of the sanctuary, but they had never been lit. They were dead—the lamp was a living presence.

When men came before its light, their hearts grew big with a strange grief; the ghosts of all the years laid their finger upon their lips.

The little Stefan awoke as if from a dream, and heard his grandfather's voice speaking to him. The voice was deep and solemn as at vespers. It seemed to rise up from the stones.

"And so the Prince set out on his long journey. He went on foot to the end of Russia, and then in a little boat over a terrible sea. And he suffered storm and tribulation. But at last he came to Jerusalem, and there he lit his lamp at the Sacred Fire, and turned homewards. And again there were great storms, and often the Prince was near death,

but through it all he kept his lamp alight. And at last his pilgrimage was over. He hung the lamp before the altar, as he had promised the Blessed Mother, and gave it into the keeping of the priest, and of those who should come after him until the Last Day. And when that was done the Prince knelt down before the altar and gave up his spirit to God."

"And he was forgiven?" little Stefan whispered.

"Yes. God forgave him."

"Is God pleased that the lamp has been kept alight so long."

The old man's gnarled hands were clasped against his breast, so that the veins stood out in dark swollen lines.

"It is the fire of God," he answered. "It is the little flame that God lights in the heart of every man when he is born. And once in his life every man feels the light burning in his own breast, and knows that he must choose whether it shall burn more brightly or die out. And for those who let their lamp grow dim there is a long pilgrimage, for those who put out the light there is no forgiveness. They go out into the darkness and are no more seen." The deep splendid voice shook in a sudden gust of grief. "My father, and his father before him, have fed God's lamp by night and day," he cried, "and I too have kept faith. I have grown old—I waited for my son—and my son will never come."

Little Stefan knew now, for the first time, that his own father was dead. But he did not cry. His thin clear voice was like the first timid notes of a bird, when the winter snows have melted.

"I will keep the lamp burning, Dyed. I won't be a soldier. I'll be a priest too. And I'll grow up quickly, Dyed—I promise you I will—I'll begin now."

The old man nodded gently. He went on alone, and

threw open the doors of the screen, and the red glow flooded out on the stone flags. Little Stefan saw the lamp and the altar, and the sacred face of the ikon. He saw his grandfather take a silver vessel and fill the lamp so carefully that the flame scarcely flickered. But it was not his grandfather any more. It was one of the figures on the screen grown bright again—someone mysterious and wonderful, who kept God's fire alight, and whom God loved—a splendid glowing Being, such as little Stefan might see in Heaven.

And little Stefan crossed himself and knelt down with his forehead to the cold stones as he had many times seen the peasants do.

But the priest stood upright before the altar. His hands were clenched upon his breast, and the tears glistened on the white beard. But the lamp burnt steadily, immutably. Its glow lit a pale life in the gentle faded face of the ikon, who looked down in still compassion and tender eternal knowledge of grief. And the old priest's eyes grew clear, and the tears were dried. For the veil was lifting that had blinded him. He saw in a vision the men who had stood there before him—a long line of shadowy souls who had brought their burden of life and sorrow to this place. He saw their ghostly, trembling hands feed the lamp for the last time, and the young hands stretched out in eager faith to take on the task. They too withered. The swift-turning wheel of the years carried them into darkness. But the lamp had burnt before the altar, and the pitying face had poured down its unchanging comfort upon the changing griefs of men.

"My son—my son!" The old priest groaned aloud.

But suddenly the limits of his narrow humdrum world were broken down. His life was glorified. Sorrow and death and weariness were little things—like the village lying

in the plain, like the river that was so broad and swift and terrible when one stood upon the brink, and was really a thread of silver in the vast tapestry of the world. Death was just a shadow that faded in the steady light of God. And he, Michael Gregorovitch, had kept that light burning as it had been given him. Those unseen ones who had gone before him would give him their comfort. They would make him strong. They would hold up his failing hands, as Aaron had held up the hands of Moses—until Stefan came.

He knelt, and his eyes burnt with the fire of youth, and the faded golden vestments shone with their first splendour.

In the twilight of the church behind him little Stefan lay with his forehead to the stones and slept.

IV

The springtime of the year came, and the peasants looked along the great road and waited. They knew that the vague thing which they had always known and feared was coming to them at last. They heard its tread beyond the horizon—it came pounding over the plain, and the dust rose in strange white clouds under its feet.

For three nights and days the retreating army poured through the little village. There was not a moment's cease in the dragging sound of the soldiers' feet, and in the rattle and bang of artillery over the cobbles and the clank of hoofs. It was an unending river slushing between slimy broken banks. The soldiers were not like men. They were unshaven and black with mud, and when they tried to speak they made strange and dreadful noises in their throats like tortured animals.

Some of the peasants picked up what they could carry and

went with the stream, but the greater part remained. For their wooden houses and their scrap of field were all they had, and without them there was no life. So they waited, and on Good Friday the storm broke upon them.

There were casks of forgotten vodka in the Government storehouse, and the army had had a hard march. And they were embittered by the long fruitless pursuit. And all that day the village floated in a fiery burning lake of hell.

It was still enough in the priest's house. The old woman lay on her bed staring up at the ceiling with her unseeing eyes. She had had a stroke in the early morning, when old Boris Sonieff had been shot coming out of his house, and now there was no world for her but the world of sound. Little Stefan sat close by her side and held her hand. He looked very small and white, but he had not once cried. His grandfather bent over him and kissed him.

"You must stay here quietly, Stefan. Keep the door shut, and if anyone should come, try and run over to the church and let me know. They will not hurt a child. You must not be afraid, Stefan—you must be brave and take care of your grandmother."

Outside, a man burst into a shout of drunken laughter, and the wooden door groaned under the impact of a reeling body. The inmates did not move, they stood there like statues—frozen with fear. But the hoarse voice faded amidst the everlasting thud and clash of passing troops.

Little Stefan steadied his white lips.

"I'm not afraid. I will take care of grandmother. I am not a bit afraid."

But the old woman cried out. Her words were thick and almost unrecognisable.

"Don't leave me—for the love of God stay with us—something dreadful will happen—I feel it coming—"

"I must go, wife, the lamp must be filled. And there is the midnight service. You would not have me forget God?"

But it seemed that her mind, too, was dulled—that she could hear nothing but these sounds outside. Her lips kept up an incessant agonised murmur. "Don't go! Don't go!" and the stillness of her body was horrible.

The priest made the sign of the cross over her. His face was livid, and he went towards the door trembling and stumbling, like a broken old man. The child followed him, with a funny stiff little smile on his lips. It was almost a grin, as though someone were pulling at the muscles of his face. But when the door closed, he ran to the ikon against the wall and lit the lamp and crouched down before it, burying his head in his arms.

A group of soldiers saw the black-frocked priest come out of the house, and raised a howl of laughter, one of them pointed his gun and his inflamed eye glared maliciously along the barrel.

The old man went on his way. He was not trembling any more. He carried his great height nobly, and his answering gaze was serene and gentle—without scorn or anger. So that the men stood still, staring after him till he had reached the steps of the church. Then they shook themselves and were ashamed that they had been ashamed. A fair-faced tipsy boy bent down and gathered up a handful of wet mud, and flung it with all his strength. The chance aim was good. The filthy missile struck the priest on the cheek, and spread out in an ugly ludicrous smear. He turned an instant and looked back at them, and he was smiling through the mire and blood—with the same unfaltering compassion. And his raised hand blessed them.

He went on unhindered. But inside the church he

stumbled and lurched against the cold wall. For there had been a stone in that chance handful of dirt, and the blood was dripping fast on to the white beard. A man who had been waiting in the shadow, crept towards him.

"Father—have they hurt you?"

"Is that you, Dmitri? It is nothing—a ball of mud—it was not meant to harm."

"The swine! The accursed swine!"

"No—just children—foolish excited children; they do not know what they do. One day they will be sorry. We must be patient. Will you give me your arm, my son? I am a little shaken, and there is much to do to-night; to-night we must rejoice more than we have ever done. For we know better now how God suffered, and how dark it was in the world whilst the stone lay before His sepulchre. But to-morrow the light rises again—we know that it can never be put out."

The peasant did not speak till they had reached the steps before the screen, and then he stood still peering about him.

"Father—there will be only women at the service to-night. . . ."

"Why should that be, Dmitri?"

". . . but they will have drunk themselves helpless. We have shown them where Boris kept his stores. And we have news. A man crept through last night. Our armies are safe. They are making a stand. They will attack—in a few hours, they may be here again." He clutched nervously at the priest's arm. "Ivan has buried ammunition and guns. Father—each man will be at his post to-night. We shall wait—for your signal."

"What signal?"

"From the belfry." He pointed back into the shadow. "After the service—the tocsin, Father—and then we shall

know. And we shall have your blessing. We shall cut their throats like pigs."

The priest stood there staunching the wound on his cheek.

"But we are not soldiers, Dmitri. We have yielded to the enemy. It would be a massacre."

"Have they not massacred our people?"

The priest murmured to himself:—

"But I say unto you, resist not evil—bless them that curse you."

"Father, God has delivered them into our hands."

"Thou shalt do no murder!"

The peasant seemed to shrink together, to bend under a sudden burden of despair.

"You know God's will, Father. You are a holy man. We trust you. But we shall wait at midnight and if you signal . . ."

But there was no answer, and Dmitri slipped away into the shadow. The door opened and closed again upon the sudden rush of tumult.

The priest stood alone before the altar.

Dusk came on, and night. Within the village a murmur was rising like the first notes of a tempest. There was a wind of voices; there were sharp lightning flashes of sound.

The priest knelt before the altar, praying.

The lamp shone like a red stain on the darkness.

V

It was all still in the village—quite still. The lurid glow in the high windows of the church had burnt itself out. The hushed, sobbing breath of the women who knelt, huddled together on the stone floor, mingled with the silver clash of the censers as they threw their grey clouds

towards the altar. Two surpliced boys sang the antiphon, but their voices were shaken and tuneless, and their eyes never left three tall shadows that stood by the church door watching.

"Like as the smoke vanisheth let them vanish, and like as wax melteth before the fire. . . ."

"Christ has risen!"

". . . So shall the ungodly perish at the presence of God, but let the righteous rejoice. . . ."

"Christ has risen!"

"Christos Vorkrece!" murmured the women.

The priest sat on his wooden throne before the altar. In the light of the lamp his vestments shone with a smouldering splendour. Theirs was a red gold—red like the stain upon the white beard. He sat motionless, looking over the heads of the worshippers towards the door. He was like a dead man set out in state.

"Rejoice! Rejoice! Christ has risen!"

The women embraced one another furtively, cringingly, as though a raised, unseen hand waited to strike them down. Then one by one they rose and crept up the steps of the altar, and gave the priest their Easter kiss. And each one, as they bent down, whispered to him.

One of the shadows laughed.

"Christ is risen!"

The old man stared out into the darkness.

"Yes—He is risen!"

"Father, they have trampled on the young corn."

The old man stirred to sudden life.

"Blessed are those that hunger. . . ."

"Father, two days since Marie Olenorf was happy—and she was to have been married—and now she is raving mad!"

"Blessed are the pure in heart. . . ."

"Father, they have shot old Boris and burnt down his farm."

"Blessed are those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake. . . ."

"Father, your house is in ashes."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . ."

"Father, your wife could not move—she could not escape."

The old face was a distorted mask.

"Blessed are those that mourn. . . ."

"Father, Little Stefan is dead—he is lying in the road outside the church."

The sweat on the livid cheeks glittered in blood-red drops.

"Blessed are ye that weep now. . . ."

"Father, they are waiting! Give the signal."

He stood up. The high mitre blotted out the lamp behind him, and the light shone about his head.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God!"

They stood in a little cowering group, staring at him as at a vision. Then one by one they quietly slunk out into the night.

But the three shadows remained. They came forward, and a soft jangle of steel accompanied the heavy, insolent tread. The priest stood waiting.

"Well, holy sir, that was a most interesting ceremony—quite charming! I'm glad I kept myself sober for it. If the women hadn't been so deuced ugly I should have been glad to join in. But perhaps they wouldn't have accepted enemies, eh?"

The priest's grey lips moved twice without sound.

"The festival is for you also—for all men. There are no enemies here."

Their uproarious laughter echoed through the empty church.

"Is that so? Prove it. Give us the Easter kiss, old man!"

"Yes, the kiss of brotherhood!"

Their red, grinning faces shone as they come into the light. The priest's great hands were clenched across his breast, and their vodka-laden breath fanned his cheek.

"That's a nasty cut—faugh! All bloody, too! One of our fine fellows did that, I wager."

"Yes."

"Little things like that are bound to happen. You can't blame them. War's war. You don't bear a grudge, do you? You're a real Christian, aren't you, Father?"

"A Christian . . ." He seemed to be striving after some dark thought. "Seventy times seven," he muttered.

They stood close about him, and their inflamed eyes were evil, inquisitive, impatient. They were like beasts of prey hesitating before the attack. One of them pointed suddenly.

"Someone told me about that lamp—a queer story—a sort of relic. It has burned two hundred years—or something."

The priest turned slightly. It was very still.

• "Two hundred years."

"Not been out once? Well"—he bent forward, with a laugh—"it's out now."

It was almost pitch dark. The priest went stumbling down the steps. His great hands wound themselves round the stem of one of the giant candlesticks. It stood six feet high, and was made of solid brass. There was a queer sound of something splitting, and a thud; then oaths—the rasp of swords dragged from their scabbards—shuffling, stumbling

footsteps—the clash of steel groping along the walls—the sudden shrill turn of a key in a rusty lock.

It was five minutes before the two men found the door by which the priest had escaped.

It was old and strong and iron-studded.

They beat against it with the hilt of their swords.

Somewhere overhead the bells jangled hideously.

The peasants cowering on their naked fields crossed themselves, and felt for their secret weapons.

“The tocsin ! . . .”

II

THIRST

I

WHEN he came in the first thing he saw was the little red lamp and the dim face of the ikon looking at him over the flame. Whether it was night or day, the saint's expression never changed, because it was always night in Michel Goubine's hut, and the shadows were like the shadows in a painted picture—hard and definite and unimoving. Michel did not even know the saint's name. He had bought the ikon off a pedlar, who could only tell him that it was a very wonderful and holy picture, worth far more than the fifty kopecks which he asked for it. But, however tired or cold or drunk Michel Goubine might be on his return, he would invariably take off his fur cap and stand for a moment with bowed head as though in prayer. He did not really pray. He had nothing to pray for. It did not occur to him that things could be different. God had arranged life as it was, and Michel had perfect confidence in God and in God's servants—the Tsar, and even the police who carried out God's commandments. So that everything was quite simple.

Old Anna, Michel's mother lived with him. She seemed as unchanging as the ikon and the shadows. She was always in her place when he returned, huddled up close to the stove, and making smooth, rapid movements with her

fingers. In other days she had been a lace-maker, but now she was quite blind and bent almost double in the effort to see what her agile fingers were doing. But she could light the stove and make cabbage soup as well as anyone, and when she moved about it was as though the walls and the two chairs and the table were warm living things whose nearness she could feel. When she went to throw refuse out into the courtyard she would linger for a moment, sniffing the air, or sunning herself like a lean old cat. But she never went beyond the threshold.

Michel Goubine loved his mother. He did not beat her even on Monday morning when the jolly glow of Sunday night's carouse had burnt itself out, and he woke up cold and stiff and wretched, to find her still asleep on her bed of rags. He would light the stove himself and wait patiently till the warmth thawed her out of her stupor. When there was not enough to eat for both of them he would make a great noise, fishing greedily from their common bowl, and smacking his lips over his empty spoon. And he would chuckle silently to himself to see how easily he deceived her.

"Oh, but that was good, little mother!" he would say in a thick, satisfied voice, "that was good!"

Sometimes, when he had had luck, he brought her presents, a holy candle that had been blessed in Jerusalem, or a hair from a saint's beard, or a lump of earth that a pilgrim had carried all the way from Calvary itself. And her joy over these treasures kept him warm and laughing through the bitterest days.

But more even than his mother Michel loved Fydora. Fydora lived in the next room, and there was nothing between them but a half-door over which she would put her head to watch him. In the morning, however dark it was, he could feel her warm, soft eyes follow him as he stamped

about over the mud floor, and he would go up to her and kiss her on her velvety quivering nose.

"Good morning, little sister!"

Fydora was old—much older in her way than Michel's mother—and very ugly. In all Moscow there was not a more raw-boned, ungainly animal. But Michel loved her and between them there was the deepest understanding. Fydora knew what life was. She knew what it meant to stand outside the Assembly House of Nobles through half a glacial winter's night waiting to carry a riotous party home-wards—or to some place of ill-fame in the Grabshewka Street, where, again, they would wait together, silent and motionless as statues under their pall of snow. She knew why Michel drank off four glasses of vodka on end at the public-house by the river side, and she would bring him home, singing and shouting on his box, with a sure comradely solicitude. She knew, too, that it was of no use to go lame or sick. It was of no use to hang one's head. People didn't care to drive behind a dreary, decrepit-looking horse. So when the snow lay thick on the uneven Moscow streets and some fine fur-coated gentleman would answer Michel's insinuating "Where to—where to?" with a curt order, Fydora would prick up her ears and dash off, clashing her bells, as swift and sprightly as any three-year-old. In their way Fydora and her blue-eyed, good-humoured master became celebrities, and people haggled less with Michel than with any of the other *iswotshik*. They knew that however pitiless and exacting they might be, Michel and Fydora would remain swift and willing and patient to the end.

Michel had one brother, Grigory, who was *drornik* to a big house in a quiet, respectable street near the Kremlin. He was much older than Michel, and had been wounded

in the Russo-Japanese war, of which he would tell many strange and terrible tales after his second glass in the inn by the river. But usually he was silent, and seemed content to listen. Michel was very proud of him, and when Grigory talked Michel would look round at his companions with a happy smile as though to say, "See, what a brother I have!" But Grigory never came to Michel's hut. For one thing he was lame and the distance troubled him, and for another he was an official and much superior to a common droschki driver. People's reputation and even their liberty depended on Grigory's good-will. When strangers came to stay at the house to which he was doorkeeper it was he who took their passports to the police. It was through him that the police knew intimately the habits and friends of his master, and his prejudices flavoured many a secret dossier. So that people pressed money into Grigory's hand, and even when they bullied him they were afraid. And Grigory knew—

Life was a very simple business in Michel's eyes. Even the war did not trouble him. He had been discharged in his first year of service on account of a faulty heart which had never troubled him before, so all that the war meant for Michel was an increased bustle in the streets, more resplendent officers to be driven about, and a daily visit to the big station to see the wounded brought in. At the sight of the poor suffering faces Michel's heart overflowed with pity, and he would get down from his box, fur cap in hand, and make a collection for them among the onlookers. And he was so earnest, so quick-tongued, there was such whimsical pathos in his round blue eyes, that no one could resist him.

But he never knew what the war was about—or cared—not from the first day to the last.

He never connected war with the disaster which overtook him. He came tired and cold one night to the inn by the

water's side and laid his money down on the dirty counter. He gave no order—the innkeeper knew what he wanted—and he did not look at any of his boon companions, because at a word or a crooked glance he would have fought them. And he knew that in a minute or two—almost at one gulp—he would be laughing and happy again, ready to fall on his enemy's neck and kiss him in the glorious resurrection of their brotherhood. So he waited. But the innkeeper did not touch his money.

"What do you want?" he asked. "There is no vodka. Don't you know even that, stupid?"

Michel looked up heavily.

"Eh?"

"No vodka. Not in all Russia. By order of the Tsar."

Michel continued to stare at him uncomprehendingly. The man's fat usually good-humoured face was white and sullen. It gave him no help. He looked round at the other occupants of the close, evil-smelling room, but they hung their heads or turned away from him like cattle from a bright light. It was evident that they had been there some time—waiting, expectant, incredulous; they stood about in motionless, uncomplaining groups, though every now and then there would rise from one or other of them a long deep-drawn sigh.

The innkeeper beat the counter with his fist.

"Do you think I have drunk it all myself? I tell you it is by order of the Tsar!"

"What does the Tsar want with all our vodka?"

It was Sergey Timofeitch who spoke. He was young and hot-headed, and people rumoured strange things about him: He stared round challengingly, but when he saw Grigory Goubine sitting alone at one of the tables, watching him with narrowed, furtive eyes, he crossed himself instinctively

from old habit, because it was known that he believed neither in God nor devil—and slunk out into the night.

They never saw Sergey Timofeitch again.

From that night onwards life began to change for Michel. It was not less simple, but it grew to be something immense and hideous and threatening. Once it had been a little space in which Michel had moved contentedly. It had contained his hut and his mother and Fydora, long hard hours of work and patches of gorgeous oblivion. At the end of it Michel had foreseen—in so far as he foresaw anything—a little grave and God. But now life seemed to have burst its dam and to have spilled over vast uncharted spaces in which he drifted helplessly.

And it was as though, too, very slowly, thick wrappings were being unwound from his body, leaving him naked to the cold. A film which had blurred outlines and colours alike began to thin so that he saw things in their stark greyness. He saw the wounded, but his heart did not overflow with pity. They aroused in him something obscure and cruel. The sight of them was like a hot wind blowing over a parched and gasping desert. In the midst of him there seemed to be a round ball of fire that grew and grew—devouring him. He did not think about all this. But it was so.

Fydora never heard him laugh or sing. She did not have to bring him home after the night's carouse, so she herself seemed to lose courage. Night or day he drove her soberly, brooding with an empty mind.

II

One night, many months later, Michel's sleigh carried a military doctor to the house where Grigory was door-keeper. The officer had arrived at Moscow by one of the Red

Cross trains and his uniform was caked with dry mud as though he had come from a long, terrible, journey. He gave his orders curtly, but it was his face, as it flashed for a moment in the lamplight, which made Michel crack his whip over Fydora's ears and send her galloping along the white street. Not even among the wounded had Michel seen a face so grim with pain, and this doctor was not wounded, but vigorous and young.

"Yes, yes, your honour," Michel shouted over his shoulder; "in five minutes we shall be there—I promise you."

The doctor nodded as though he had heard without understanding, and sat back in the sleigh, huddled among his furs. But when they reached their destination he sprang out instantly and stood for a moment looking up at the unlit windows. He was frowning and his thickly-gloved hands clenched and unclenched themselves in nervous indecision.

"You must wait here for me," he said at last. "I may be a long time. You are to drive me back to the station——"

"Yes, yes, your honour," Michel answered cheerfully. "We will wait—never fear."

It was mid-winter and so cold that the air seemed frozen. It hurt to breathe it—as though one were sucking sharp little knives into one's breast. Every now and then a snow-flake drifted down through the darkness. It was the only moving thing in the sleeping street and the noise of angry voices and the bang of a door seemed to come from another world. Presently Grigory limped out from the courtyard. He was rubbing himself as though he had been hurt and cursing under his breath. In his filthy, tattered shuba he looked like some disreputable old cur.

"God help us——" He peered up into Michel's face. "Eh, so it's you, brother?"

"Yes," said Michel, nodding sleepily.

"That's a strange thing—a lucky chance. You have brought our dear master home——"

"I didn't know that," said Michel, waking up a little.

"Yes, indeed—Vassily Volkonsky. No one was expecting him—not even his wife, Tatiana Sergeyevna. The whole household was asleep. I too. He had to kick me, and he kicked hard; he was in a great hurry."

"Yes, in a great hurry," Michel agreed. "I was to have an extra rouble if I got here in five minutes."

"An extra rouble. You'll be getting quite rich, little brother! And how far had you to come?"

"From the station."

"Aha, that was good driving. And now why do you wait?"

"I am to drive him back."

Grigory's head drooped a little on one side and he scratched his beard with a dirty forefinger.

"Dear me. So soon. No wonder he is in a hurry, and so anxious. A short leave. It will make Tatiana Sergeyevna cry when she hears. But then when one is a soldier—well, well, it is a cold night."

"Yes, very cold," said Michel, drowsing again.

"God keep you, brother!"

"God keep you, brother!"

Grigory shuffled back to his den in the courtyard, and again it was quite still except for the mysterious tinkle of Fydora's bells as she stirred uneasily. In front of him Michel could see nothing but her thin flanks heaving in the light of the two lamps. The snow had begun to fall faster. It rose about them in a muffling tide so that not a sound reached them from the wide thoroughfares where the regular night life of Moscow had begun. They might have

been alone in a white frozen place of the dead. But Michel did not think of death or of anything in particular. He brooded sullenly, motionless and staring, like a rough-hewn statue. The breath froze to icicles on his moustache. The cold crept closer and closer like an encircling enemy. But it was not a cruel enemy. It soothed him gently. Sullenly and unwillingly his pain let go its hold and watched with baleful eyes as he slipped away into the dim distance. The lights, covered with snow and ice, grey pale, and Fydora's bells were quite silent now. But he could still see her flanks. Her ribs were the ribs of a mammoth skeleton, encircling the whole world. Their misery was Misery itself.

So Michel Goubine fell asleep.

He thought that he was dead. The face close to his, and full of tenderness and pity, was the face of the ikon. There were myriads of lights shining behind her and they made a silver aureole about her head. He wanted to throw himself on his knees before her, as it is right that one should do before a saint of God.

"Drink!" she said. "Drink!"

He drank what she put to his lips. That, too, was unfamiliar and wonderful. It was very sweet and very strong. He drank eagerly, closing his eyes. And when he looked up again he knew that he was not dead. He was not in Heaven. This was not the saint of the ikon. It was a woman who held him. His head was on her knee, his face half turned against her breast. For a moment he lay there breathless, quite still, like a frightened, fascinated child. Then the wine that he had drunk burnt its way through his frozen veins and he sat up with a scream of anguish.

"Hush, in Christ's name!"

Michel was silent instantly. The cry had been torn from

him by the sheer suddenness of the assault. But he knew how to be patient and quiet as a dog. He stood up, swaying a little, and gazed stupidly about him. There was the doctor, Vassily Volkonsky, and his pretty young wife, Tatiana. Michel saw that she had been crying. The tears were still wet on her cheeks and she clung to her husband and looked at Michel as though he frightened her. The doctor's face also was full of sorrow and anxiety.

"We thought you were dead," he said. "We had to carry you in."

But still Michel said nothing. Everything about him confused and troubled him inexpressibly—the floor that shone like thick ice, the rich skins and warm-coloured rugs, the deep, soft divans and the slender-limbed chairs that one might snap between one's fingers, and the lights that were brighter than the lights in the Cathedral at Easter time. But most troubling of all was the man he saw in the long glass opposite him. It was as though he had never seen himself before—never understood.

He looked away at last. He looked at the great flagon of red wine on the table and at the girl who had held his head against her breast. And a kind of groan fought its way up from his contracted throat. It was like the groan of some hungry, thwarted animal, and Tatiana Sergeyevna hid her face against her husband's shoulder.

"I shouldn't have kept you waiting so long," the doctor went on with an impatient compassion. "I could not help myself. You shall have two extra roubles. But you must drive me back to the station at once. If I do not catch the train—but I must—you understand—at any cost——"

"Yes, yes, your honour, in five minutes."

She stood humbly apart. She was just their servant. She wore a smocked blouse such as a peasant girl wears on a

feast day, and her hands were red and toil-worn. Her big, innocent eyes dropped under Michel's gaze.

The doctor struggled into his fur coat and stamped out into the hall.

"We must start at once," he shouted.

"What is your name, little sister?" Michel asked.

"Katya," she answered, "Katya."

"Katya!" he echoed under his breath. They looked at each other long and wistfully. And then Michel Goubine turned and lumbered heavily through the hall and out into the snow again.

But that night when he stood before the ikon he did not bow his head as he was wont to do. He looked at the pale, passionless face. He thought of the wine and how he had lain against her breast. And when he threw himself down on his filthy bed the bitter cold could not chill his blood.

III

In the morning the secret fire in him burned so that he could not lie still. He got up, and by the light of the tiny lamp before the ikon looked at his home. His mother was still asleep. She lay curled up on the stove, her head thrown back, her mouth gaping in a toothless smile. Presently she stirred under his gaze and sat up clawing the air.

"Is that you, Michel? Are you going already? The sun has not risen yet. Rest awhile till I have lit the fire."

But he did not answer. She became afraid of the silence. He watched her warily as she scrambled to the ground and came towards him with her fleshless arms outstretched. And then a sudden panic seized him and he flung himself out of the hut into the grey dawn.

And he loved his mother. But if she had touched him that moment he would have screamed with the horror of it.

All that day Michel Goubine tramped the streets. He ate nothing and there was nothing that he could drink that could quench the thirst in him. His mind was blank of thought or purpose. But towards dusk he came to the quiet street near the Kremlin and, standing in the shadow of the houses, he waited. It was as though he knew. And presently he saw her coming towards him. She carried a basket over her arm and moved lightly and quickly over the snow like a little haunted ghost.

He stood in front of her.

"Katya!" he said.

She stopped short and looked up at him. In the grey reflected light of the snow they could not see each other's face. But he could hear her breathing—quick and shallow it was, like the breathing of someone who has been running fast. And he himself trembled. "Katya," he said, "will you come with me to the inn by the river? There will be dancing there to-night. Will you dance with me?" And as she did not answer he put his hand in the pocket of his shuba and clinked the two roubles which Vassily Volkonsky had given him. "I have money—we will make a feast—we shall be happy, Katya."

She swayed towards him like a small tree in a gust of wind.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I don't know. Tatiana Sergeyevna may not let me—perhaps it is not right."

"Tell her——" he said with a strange choking in his throat—"tell her that Michel Goubine drove her husband to the station in five minutes—because he loved you. Otherwise he would have fallen asleep. Tell her Michel Goubine is an honest driver, and that he will drive her anywhere she will for less than any other *isvotshik* in Moscow."

"Perhaps it is not right," she repeated shakely. "I am only a poor girl—I don't know——"

"You want to come, Katya?" he whispered.

"Yes," she answered so that he could scarcely hear her.

He came closer to her so that he could feel the warmth of her breath on his face. He tried to say something—something that had hung all day just beyond his reach. He made a vague, clumsy gesture towards the solemn houses:

"They're happy," he stammered. "They can drink—it must be right for us too—sometimes."

So that night Katya and Michel Goubine danced together and the dust flew under their feet. The *habitués* of the inn stood in a wide circle about them and clapped their hands. The sight of the two handsome young people so passionately self-absorbed heated their blood with a false intoxication. They reeled about the room, shouting and laughing and stamping. But their drunkenness had no heart to it. Beneath the noise and fever there was a brooding despair, a black, wordless anger.

When they were not dancing Katya and Michel sat together at one of the wooden tables. They spoke very little. A beautiful hazy exhaustion came over them and they would look at each other dreamily with smiling, half-closed eyes. They did not need to know each other better. The force that locked them together asked no questions.

And then when the haze began to lift and a chill reality laid its hand upon them they would dance again, more fiercely than they had ever danced before.

Michel brought Katya back to the house in the quiet street and in the shadow of the courtyard he caught her against his breast. They clung to one another silently, and silently at last she slipped away from him into the darkness. But Michel Goubine stayed where she left him. He swayed a little like a man who is standing on a giddy height, and his eyes were fixed ahead, sightless and fascinated.

Grigory came limping out of his den. He shuffled up to his tall brother and touched him slyly on the arm.

"That is a pretty friend you have made, little Michel," he said. "I congratulate you. Katya is a good girl. But you must be careful—I tell you, she is a good girl. I am older than you, little brother, and I am dromnik to this house. I have my duty—I have a right to ask—what will come of it?" Michel stirred drowsily but did not answer, and Grigory sidled closer to him. "After all, you can't marry, little brother. Marriage means money. And how could you take a wife to your home? There is no room for her whilst our mother lives. And often there is not enough food for two. No, you must get money first."

"Perhaps Vassily Volkonsky would help us," Michel muttered. "After all I did him a good turn. If I had not pulled myself together that night there would have been trouble. They would have arrested him."

"Ah, indeed," said Grigory Goubine softly.

"Yes. Katya told me," Michel went on with an increasing eagerness. "She overheard them talking. He came away from the front without leave. He wanted to warn his friends here that things are going badly. The men have no rifles, no food, no boots. They are being betrayed. Soon there will be a revolution."

Grigory rubbed his hands together.

"He said that, eh? Well, he may help you. Let us hope so, little brother. You will need help. Perhaps I could do something. I have influence. Find out everything you can from Katya. It may be useful. We must do what we can—for without money how should you and Katya live?"

It was late when Michel stumbled over the threshold of his hut. Old Anna who had been crouching by the

dead fire rose up, facing the blast of bitter air and wailing shrilly.

"My son, where have you been? Have you brought food home? There is no food here. To get food one must have money, and there is no money, not a kopeck. Have you brought money home, Michel? All day I have been waiting. Oh, my little son, where have you been?"

But Michel's red inflamed eyes were fixed on the ikon. His fur cap was clenched between his hands as though it had been the throat of an enemy, and for the first time he prayed with rapid lips:—

"Give me Katya, give me Katya."

It was more a threat than a prayer.

Old Anna clung to his arm. She drove her bony fingers into his flesh.

"You wouldn't let your poor old mother starve, Michel?"

He stared into her face, then round at the gloomy, evil-smelling hovel. And suddenly, with a cry of despair, he lifted his clenched fist and struck her down.

IV

They came at dusk—silent, mysterious, portending evil—and at midnight they left again, carrying with them certain documents. There was not a drawer or cupboard that they had not ransacked and whose contents did not lie scattered over the shining floor like autumn leaves after a gale. And in the midst of the ruthless confusion Tatiana Sergeevna lay and wept.

Katya knelt beside her and comforted her. There was such secret joy in her own heart that her peasant's tongue was loosened and she spoke with a beautiful tenderness and hope. She could not believe in sorrow or misfortune,

For to-morrow night she would dance again with Michel at the inn by the river.

"You will see, madam, it is nothing—just some silly mistake. After all, who should wish your honours trouble, or what harm can you have done the Tsar—you who are so good to everyone?"

Tatiana Sergeyevna sat up at last. She spoke as though she were thinking aloud.

"It is no mistake," she said quietly. "Someone has betrayed us. Not one of our friends. They all love Russia. Besides, they are too deeply involved. It was someone who has nothing to lose and everything to gain—someone who knew what happened that night. There was myself—and you, Katya. Did you betray us?"

The two women looked at each other. Katya stood up and crossed her hands over her breast. Her face was so simple and honest that Tatiana Sergeyevna flushed with shame.

— "I have been faithful to your honours," Katya said. "I swear it by all the Saints and by my dead mother!"

Then suddenly there came into her eyes the look of someone who has been shot straight through the heart.

But now Tatiana Sergeyevna saw only her own misery.

Before the sun rose Katya crept down the stairs and out into the courtyard. She crossed over the frozen snow to where the dromnik Grigory lay asleep and roused him gently.

"When Michel comes to-night tell him that I cannot go with him," she said. "Tell him that everything between us is finished. Because I know that he betrayed us. And he has broken my heart!"

Grigory grinned secretly.

"Very well, little sister, I will tell him,"

When she had gone he rolled himself up in his dirty sheepskin and went to sleep again.

But he did not forget. That night he watched Michel take up his stand where he could see the windows of the big house. When a light flashed in the topmost window of all Michel knew that Katya was coming. To-night no light showed anywhere. But that did not trouble him. He had the inflexible certainty of a man who must hope or perish.

He did not hear Grigory come up to him. Although he was lame and clumsy Grigory could move as softly as a cat. Like a cat too he rubbed himself against Michel's sleeve.

"It's no use, little brother," he said. "She will not come. She gave me a message for you. It is as I told you—she is a good girl, and sensible. She cares for you—I do not deny it—but she sees how impossible it all is. She talked it over with me. 'After all, what has Michel to offer?' she said. 'A miserable hovel with an old hag to keep us company and take the food out of our mouths. And I am accustomed to warm clothes and a comfortable bed and enough to eat. In a month's time we should hate one another and Michel would beat me.'" Grigory waited a moment and peered up into his brother's face. "That is what she said," he muttered.

"It is not true," Michel answered almost indifferently.

Grigory shrugged his shoulders.

"She will not come," he repeated.

"That is not true."

Michel's face was like the face of a dead man carved out of wood.

"I advised her not to come," Grigory went on with an air of resolute honesty. "I did not want her to encourage you. It is better for you to realise the truth in time. To

marry a girl like Katya one must have money, little brother. It is as I said. If you had money it would be different. Then she would come out and dance with you and be your wife."

"It is not true!" Michel cried out threateningly.

"Well, I have given my message. God preserve you!"

"It is not true!" Michel whispered.

He did not move. His shadow merged itself into other shadows and was lost. And all night long Katya sat weeping at her unlit window.

V

So Michel Goubine made money. In the early morning he set out with his sleigh and paced Fydora up and down the principal streets, hugging the curb and peering into people's faces. "Where to? Where to, your honours?" he shouted, and invited them with humorous, insinuating gestures. But his eyes had no laughter in them. They were the hard, pitiless eyes of a hawk. And beneath his obsequiousness there was a sort of menace.

"Where to? Where to, your honours?"

He never haggled. He took what came. And he drove Fydora mercilessly. For a rouble he waited through a bitter night outside the Assembly House, and when Fydora, half dead with cold, stumbled in her tracks, he beat her till the blood spurted from her terrible ribs. The next morning Michel saw the wound and kissed it, and kissed Fydora on her quivering velvet nose.

"You see, we must make money, little sister!" he explained humbly. "Make money for Katya!"

And Fydora looked at him with mournful understanding. But Old Anna only understood that they were dying of starvation. All day long she cowered by the empty stove,

knitting her invisible lace, and trying to see what was going on behind her darkness. And at night when Michel entered she scrambled up and ran to meet him, clawing him all over and whimpering:—

“What have you brought home, Michel? Have you had a good day? What have you brought to eat, little son?”

“Nothing,” he said, “Nothing.”

He did not beat her. He flung her off like an importunate beggar, but not before she had felt his fleshless arms. And she went back to her corner and brooded, mumbling her thoughts.

It was difficult to tell when Old Anna slept. Night and day were all the same to her, and sometimes, sitting upright, she would fall asleep with her eyes wide open. One night she slept with her back to the wall, staring at Michel. And when he was sure that she slept he took his linen bag from his breast and by the light of the ikon began to count.

The money was very beautiful. He counted it over and over again. He grew to love the jingle of the kopecks as they slipped through his fingers and the rustle of the paper. He could not put it away. But suddenly he knew that his mother was awake. She had not moved, and yet he knew that with her ears she was watching him, counting with him.

He hid the money and lay still. And presently she began to crawl towards him, on her hands and knees, noiseless as a cat. And as she came near he crept away from her, pressing himself against the wall, escaping her stealthy fingers by a hairsbreadth. And so she hunted him. Until at last terror and weariness overcame her and she collapsed among her rags and lay stretched out and panting like a beaten dog.

And Michel stared stupidly down at her. He had loved his mother. But she had become the enemy.

He was his own enemy. He cursed himself when weak-

ness drove him to the eating-house. He cursed Fydora when she whinnied for her pitiful handful of corn. And the ball of fire within him grew so that it seemed to him that he could feel it with his hand, burning its way through his intestines.

At first the thought of Katya quenched the pain. When he stood before the ikon praying, he saw her kind, gentle face gazing at him, and it was as though a cup of wine had been held to his parched lips. But gradually the face grew dim and he could see nothing but the aureole behind—shining like a piece of gold.

One night Michel drove a party of drunken subalterns from Streylna to a house of ill-fame on the outskirts of the city. It was terrible driving. There had been a slight thaw followed by frost and the ground was a sheet of ice. The officers were impatient and shouted at Michel, promising more money, and Michel cracked his whip over Fydora's ears. Then suddenly Fydora stumbled. He flogged her. He flogged her with all his strength and with terror in his heart. But she dropped and fell over on her side like someone who has come to the end of a hard journey. And Michel forgot the money. His friend was lying there in the snow, and if he did not rouse her she would die. His cruelty was his great love.

"Come—stand up, little sister—oh, for the love of God—I will give you corn—as much corn as you can eat—only stand up——"

But Fydora did not move.

The officers grew angry. They scrambled out of the sleigh and pelted Michel with frozen snow and went off laughing.

The blood ran down Michel's face but he did not know it. He tried to cut Fydora free from her traces. He took

her poor ugly head upon his knee and coaxed her with a frantic tenderness.

"My little sister—my little sister——"

But Fydora looked at him with sad, glazing eyes. And he pressed his cheek to hers, weeping bitterly.

VI

Michel Goubine prowled the streets like a wolf whom hunger has driven among men. Now that Fydora was dead he earned nothing. Every night he thrust fifty kopecks into his mother's hand until the night came when the linen bag about his neck hung empty. But now Old Anna asked for nothing. Her agile fingers were still. She had grown so small and quiet that she seemed no more than a little wizened face peering out of a heap of rags.

But as Michel skulked, lean and tattered, through the frozen city, he became aware that strange things were about to happen. He knew because he was their cause. The terrible trouble in himself had burst like a filthy abscess and infected the whole world. When he saw the groups of workmen loitering at the street corners he saw them only as reflections of his mind. At night in the stifling taverns, when a sudden ripple of inarticulate excitement stirred the crowd like the first breath of a cyclone, he felt their passion only as a reaction to his own feverish impulse. He knew of their thirst and hunger because thirst ravaged him and hunger ate at his vitals.

Once he heard firing in the streets and the sound thrilled through his nerves like the first stirrings of a secret lust.

He did not think. He had never known how to think. But instead of thoughts, pictures came to him. It was like living in a mad cinematograph show in which the same senseless, jumbled films were shown over and over again.

As time went on they grew fewer but more distinct. It was as though some secret censor were selecting for him—choosing out what it considered vital—what it wished him to remember. At first it showed him Katya, gazing down at him as he lay with his head against her breast, then the fine room, the silver lights, the shining colours and the flagon of red wine. It showed him Vassily Volkonsky and his wife, clinging to one another and looking at him with their aloof pity. He saw himself in the long glass—hideous and filthy and uncouth, like a wretched performing bear dragged into all that polished splendour for their pleasure.

Gradually the last picture blotted out the rest. He saw nothing else and he saw it through a red pulsating vapour. It came to wield a strange power over him. It set his heart beating like a hammer. It made him grind his teeth and drive his nails into his hands. It grew to be something monstrous and superhuman—a hideous mammoth figure of cruelty and injustice.

It haunted him through his sleep.

Michel came with his last kopeck to the inn by the river. The landlord was an old friend and for a kopeck he might allow Michel to scour the rubbish heap. But when Michel entered he forgot why he had come. Instead he knew that something he had been waiting for was about to happen. The room was full of armed men, and Grigory Goubine, his brother, stood on a chair and waved his arms and shouted. He looked like a wraith in the thick evil-smelling atmosphere. His sly quietness was gone. His eyes rolled in his head and there was yellow foam on his beard. He beat his breast with his clenched fists.

“ . . . They eat and drink,” he shouted, “they swill themselves with wine, they stuff themselves with food, they dance

to music, they sleep in warm beds. And you perish here with hunger and thirst and cold. Yes, and as if that were not enough they send you to the war—you don't know against whom or what for—and when you've gone they stab you in the back. Our soldiers fight with their naked hands. They are slaughtered in thousands. And your tyrants laugh. It's what they want. There are too many of you. They want to wipe you out—because you are waking up and because they are afraid. Well, comrades, make them more afraid. You are men. You have as good a right as they to live and eat and drink and be happy."

"Yes, that is true," Michel thought, nodding to himself. "Grigory understands everything."

Grigory caught sight of Michel standing by the door and he stopped for a minute and pointed, inarticulate with passion. And the crowd turned and stared at Michel, and black rage came into their faces, and he knew that it was because of the growing rage in his own breast.

"Look!" Grigory spluttered. "Look—my own brother—the dogs on the street are not more famished. I can see his ribs through the tears in his shuba and his feet leave blood behind them. My own brother—as honest a fellow as ever trod—my own flesh and blood. And our blind old mother dying of hunger. What wrong have they done? Our mother grew blind in *their* service. My brother has toiled faithfully. What has life given him? Nothing—nothing—no wife—no home—no children—blows and kicks—and a kennel to die in. Yet he is a man like other men—he has rights like other men—passions—thirsts!"

"Yes—yes—that is so!" Michel shouted.

The crowd swayed backwards and forwards like trees in a storm.

"It is true, comrades!"

Grigory tore open his blouse. He pointed to the scars of his old wound. He screamed so that his voice broke.

"Am I not one of you? Have I not a right to speak?"

"Speak, comrade, go on!"

"Down with the tyrants!"

"Long live the people!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

But it was to Michel they turned. They swarmed round him, they kissed him on the cheeks. They lifted him shoulder high. Someone thrust a rifle into his hands. And suddenly all the pictures rushed through his brain at once—the Volkonskys—the room—the wine—Katya—himself in the long glass. He clasped the rifle to his breast. He hugged it. For at last a thought had come to him—a wonderful thought. He began to laugh from sheer happiness. He laughed till the tears rolled down from his sunken blue eyes.

"Come on, brothers!" he shouted. "I can show you where there is wine—real wine. We can be jolly again. We shan't need to go thirsty any more!"

"Lead us, comrade!" they yelled back at him. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

They poured out into the night, carrying him like a banner.

At first they were a mere handful, but men and women seemed to spring out of the earth to join them and before they reached the heart of the city they had become an army. Michel still led those immediately around him. He was drunkenly happy. Though he was still in great pain he knew that it would not be for long. Everything was going to be different. Everything was going to be all right for everyone. He was like a desert traveller who sees water glittering in the distance. He laughed and sang. He

shouted good-humoured jokes. He called to Grigory to keep close to him.

But Grigory had disappeared.

It was strange that though an hour before they had had no plan or purpose their coming should have been prepared for. Machine guns had been posted at the corners of the Ilinka Street, and a frightful burst of fire mowed down the first lines of the advance. There were police ambushed in the windows. It was too dark to take aim, but also it was not possible to miss. They shot at their leisure. As yet no one quite understood what was happening. Those at the back of the crowd still laughed and sang and pushed forward, until they trod on the bodies of their comrades. Then suddenly and for a brief space they fell silent. The gun-fire went under as though swamped by a tidal wave. Someone who had caught the flash of a rifle from an upper window screamed a warning. Doors were splintered off their hinges. There ensued a brief hunt through dark rooms and passages before the snipers were flung out like food to a ravening monster. That was the beginning. Men had begun to kill. They fell upon one another, howling with rage and misery and terror——

Michel and his comrades had broken their way into the house from which the firing had been most deadly. The ground floor belonged to a fashionable jeweller. The shutters were hardly in their place and a crowd of assistants blocked the doorways in a futile, panic-stricken effort at resistance. They were flung down and trampled underfoot. The invaders rushed the staircase. In the general uproar their entry had passed unheard, and the police were at their places, shooting coolly. They squealed like rats——

But Michel had stayed behind. He had seen precious stones before in shop windows and on the necks of women.

He had never seen them like this—close to and at his mercy. Their glitter and sparkle made him blink. He did not know what to do with them. He lurched about the shop picking up handfuls of rings and brooches and letting them run through his fingers in stupid bewilderment.

The shop-keeper who had saved himself by hiding in the shadow of a safe watched him with glazing eyes of terror. But the instinct of a lifetime was too strong for him. He made an angry grunt of protest and suddenly Michel saw him and struck him over the bald head with the butt end of his rifle.

He had not meant to kill. He had not meant anything in particular. It had happened so suddenly—so easily. He stared at the bloody thing which a moment before had been an angry human face, in astonishment and horror—then with a strange, delicious ruffling of the nerves. His throat contracted. Something obscure yet familiar stirred in the depths of him. He wanted to strike again and again.

He turned hurriedly and reluctantly. Then the stones regained their hold over him. He stuffed his pockets with them as a boy might stuff his pockets with sweets. One beautiful emerald necklace he held up to the light, laughing to himself. He did not know its value. He only thought how pretty it was.

“Katya!” he said aloud. “Katya!”

His comrades came pouring back down the staircase. He rejoined them stumbling over the jeweller’s limp, warm body as he went.

Grigory Goubine waited for them outside Vassily Volkon-sky’s house.

“It’s all right,” he shouted. “They’ve barricaded themselves in. They think if they keep quiet we shall believe there’s no one there. But I know them. All the doors are

bolted from the inside. There's a window at the back though they've forgotten. Old Grigory doesn't forget——" He beat himself with his arms and stamped his feet on the hard snow. It was as though he were performing a devil's dance. "I got cut off from the rest of you," he shouted. "It's difficult for a lame old fellow like me——"

But no one listened to him. Michel was thinking of his happiness. It had become so great that he could not bear it. It made him savage and impatient. It burnt him like a fever. He looked up at the dark, cowering house and shouted "Katya! Katya!" But his voice was lost in the uproar. His comrades were thinking of the wine he had promised them. They too were becoming angry. They did not want to get in through the window. They wanted to break in and destroy. They flung themselves against the door and the silent street reverberated with the blows of their rifles against the stout panelling. Grigory stood aside, smiling crookedly.

"Well, youth must have its way," he tittered.

But when the last barrier was gone he led the advance. He limped swiftly along the corridor and pressed the electric switches, leaving a path of light behind him. "Now, then, Vassily Volkonsky, come out and kick your servant now—come on—come on."

But there was no answer.

"Katya! Katya! It is Michel—don't be afraid."

He hunted distractedly, fumbling his way alone through the dark rooms, bruising himself against unseen obstacles, destroying where he could in growing terror and anger. His comrades, whose muffled baying sounded sinisterly beyond the darkness, had been his cunning weapons. But now he had become theirs. They outstripped him, and it was they who found Katya. She cowered by an open window

in the room where Michel had first seen her, her hands clasped as though she had been praying. Her round peasant face was white and pinched with fear. Her voice shook. But her eyes had a look of courage.

"I am in charge here," she said. "What do you want?"

They laughed with the last breath of their good humour. It was like a trapped white mouse defying them. But Grigory lurched at her and shook her by the arm.

"Where is your master?"

"Gone!"

"Gone? You were to have warned me——"

"I warned them, Grigory Goubine. They are safe, praise be to God. They are good people."

"You——!"

He shook his fist in her face. He would have struck her, but now Michel had fought his way through the crowd. He took Grigory by the scruff of the neck and tossed him aside as a terrier tosses aside a dead rat. He stretched out his arms. He wanted to tell her in one word that everything was all right—that they were going to be happy—that he was rich now. But he was out of breath and dizzy with weakness and excitement. He took a handful of jewels and held them towards her.

"Look at this, Katya—look—for you—everything."

Someone jostled him and the stones scattered over the floor. His comrades had not yet found what they had come for, but they were already drunken. They slid tipsily over the polished boards. They broke the fragile chairs like matchwood. They ripped the silken coverings as a tiger rips flesh. The murder in the streets had not incensed them as did the delicate loveliness of this room. It made them hideous.

Michel babbled between laughter and tears.

"Katya—it's all right—I planned it—we're going to dance again and be happy—we're all going to be happy."

For the first time she looked at him. His blue eyes shone out of his gaunt, blood-smeared face with the brilliancy of fever. She crept closer to the open window.

"If you touch me, Michel Goubine, I shall throw myself out. I swear it by Almighty God!"

He gaped stupidly.

"Katya—look here—I've got more—I'm rich!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

They had found the cellars. Grigory Goubine stumbled into the room with bottles under his arms and sticking out of his pockets. They danced a savage saturnalia round him. And Michel went with them. He fought at first, but he was like a swimmer carried out by a roaring tide, who knows that he is lost yet struggles instinctively. He held the emerald necklace above the sea of heads in a last effort to make her understand. The tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Katya—my dear one—it was for you—everything——"

What they could not drink they spilled on the floor. Michel drank till his legs gave way under him and he rolled out of the house into the gutter. But it was not the old intoxication. The wine had not quenched his thirst. It fanned the fire in him and the flames lit up his brain. They lit up the pictures that came incessantly. But they were not the old pictures. They were not of Katya. They were of the little, bald-headed jeweller.

And every time he saw him it was as though an icy wind blew over his nerves, thrilling them with a torturing ecstasy.

VII

They made him a soldier of the Red Guard. Because he could shoot and had been in the Army, he was put in

command of ten men, but he gave no orders. He did not know how to, and the ten would not have obeyed. But they went about together and hunted the enemies of the people. They had no mercy. They spared no one less miserable than themselves.

"To-night there will be fine work for you," Grigory Goubine had said, smiling and rubbing his hands.

To-night had come.

Michel and his ten comrades slouched into the Kremlin through the Spassky Gate. They did not lift their caps to the Holy Image as they passed beneath. They laughed and threw lumps of snow at it. The masonry round the ikon was snicked with bullets, but the ikon itself had remained unharmed.

"Christ was a bourgeois," one of Michel's companions said angrily. "All the bourgeois should be crucified."

Leaving the barracks on their left they came into the big square and lined up with their backs to the Arsenal. They knew why they had come. A few were silent, but the rest snarled and bickered like wild beasts before their food is thrown to them. A brilliant moonlight poured down between the high walls and there was no need for the torches that flared up at intervals, throwing restless shadows over the deathly tranquillity. It was bitter cold. The cold froze Michel's blood, but it could not cool the secret fire in him. The suffering that it inflicted seemed afar off. It was the suffering of someone else of whom he had heard. It did not touch him. But the pain within was a red-hot stone. Every now and then he rubbed snow against his fever-cracked lips. He drank, too, from the bottle that he carried in his shuba. But the spirit was like brackish water.

Presently the barrack gates were flung open and a black stream of shadows passed out. As they came out into the

moonlight they herded close to one another, and their guards ran in among them, striking and snapping like wolves.

"Now then, comrades, load up!" Grigory Goubine shouted. "Load up and death to the enemies of the Revolution!" He limped excitedly up and down the line. "Bring them up closer. Some of these fine fellows can't shoot very well. They haven't had much practice yet. Here, give me a rifle. I'll show you. In my day I never missed my mark. Set them further apart. So take aim. Every man his target. Pick out a good spot, comrades—the heart—the breast—the head. Not that it matters. We have ammunition to spare. Let them suffer a little, the dogs. Now then, are you ready?"

He stood at Michel's side. He held his rifle like the expert he was—like a hunter whose quarry is in sight. His little eye gleamed hungrily along the barrel. But an iron hand tightened about Michel's breast. He could hardly breathe. He felt like a man fighting his way up from his grave. A frightful nausea tore at the pit of his stomach.

They stood so close to one another that he could see the face of the man he was about to kill. They looked straight into each other's eyes. They might have been friends who had met unexpectedly. He was a little fellow in a shabby coat and baggy, ill-fitting trousers. Some shopkeeper probably. One could see him bowing and smiling over his counter. Under his drooping moustache his lips moved rapidly. He seemed to be counting—one, two, three—one, two, three. Perhaps the last minutes of his life. His eyes were wide open—not frightened, only surprised and anxious and a little plaintive. He looked at Michel as though he were asking: "What is it all about, my friend? Who are you? And when can I go back to my shop?"

The girl next to him belonged to another class. In spite of her torn and filthy clothes an air of wealth still clung to her. But she was quite mad. Every now and then she laughed—quietly and horribly.

“Are you ready? When I have counted three—fire!”

The little shopkeeper made a movement of protest. Evidently this was a serious matter. And then suddenly he clasped the hand of the girl next him.

“One—two—three——”

A look of grief and astonishment and reproach came into his eyes. The girl broke off in the middle of her laughter. They turned slowly as though they were bowing to one another, then collapsed like marionettes whom the secret hand of the performer has let fall.

Michel had aimed well. But the rest had bungled. The shadows writhed and twisted on the snow.

“Club them! Club them!”

Michel ran out. Gust after gust of that icy wind swept over his naked nerves. He screamed with the agony and joy of it. The suffocating band had broken. He was free. He could drink now—this wine would make him drunken. He could slake his thirst—he could quench that burning.

When it was all done the sweat of a breaking fever drenched his body. He reeled about, laughing and gasping. He flung his arms round the man next him and kissed him on the mouth. He tried to shout but his voice cracked in his throat.

“More—more,” he whispered.

Grigory Goubine patted him on the shoulder.

“You must spare yourself, little brother. The prisons are very full.”

The dawn had broken when Michel came to his home. Old Anna sat upright and awake among her rags, her arms

clasped over her knees, staring at nothing. She turned her sorrowful, famished face towards him but there was no hope in it.

He laughed thickly.

"There Matuska. I've brought something this time. I've done good work. You shan't starve any more. Look here——"

His pockets were full of food that he had looted. He poured money into her lap. But she rose up suddenly so that it scattered over the floor. She came towards him, sniffing the air like a blind old hound. Her eyes were fixed on his hand as though they saw.

"You are drunk, Michel!"

"A little, mother—a little."

"There is something—on you—something that——"

"It is nothing, Matuska—eat, I tell you——"

He held bread to her lips, but a wailing cry broke from her. She sprang away from him with a ghastly agility and began to run wildly round the room, beating herself against the wall like a wild bird. He lurched after her and flung her down.

"Eat, Matuska—eat, I tell you!"

But she hid her face from him, whimpering.

"It smells—it smells."

He slept the sleep of an opium-eater. When he awoke it was evening again and a rank misery gripped him in its clammy hands. An awful weariness was on him and he was sick with the sickness of life itself. But the drug was at his hand. In an hour or two he would be drunk again and forget and be happy.

Old Anna lay quiet in her corner. He did not touch her or the food that was heaped beside her. He dragged him-

self out and limped to the Spassky Gate. He could hardly stand. The burning had begun again. But he could be patient and endure because of the relief that was coming.

"A busy night for you!" Grigory said, kissing him.

And his comrades looked up, licking their lips.

That night when he came back the little red lamp had burnt itself out. The face of the ikon was veiled in darkness. And still Old Anna had not moved.

The first volley was like a first gulp of vodka. Then life came back to him. His blood awoke and flowed warmly and evenly. The pain let go its hold. The world took on gorgeous colours. His head seemed to break through black clouds into a fiery morning. He became like a God.

Best of all was the face of the man opposite him. He savoured its anguish and terror as an epicure savours a rare wine. He held himself in check, tantalising his thirst with a sensual cunning. The moment before his finger pressed the trigger was one of intolerable ecstasy. And if his victim looked back at him with steady, indifferent eyes, he aimed badly—of set purpose.

Then, before sunrise, home again—to sleep.

But on the third day sleep forsook him early, and for an hour he waited in torture. And day by day sleep shortened its length of mercy. It was like the dying swing of a pendulum. Till the time came when Michel Goubine lay stretched in the filth of his hovel—from sunrise to sunset staring with burning eyes towards his quiet companion, waiting for deliverance.

VIII

It came at last. He had been prowling round the Spassky Gate like a pariah dog within scent of food. Now as the clock struck he ran forward. But the sentry stopped him with a blow from his rifle.

"Not so fast. No one passes here to-night!"

"What's that? You don't know who I am. I'm one of the firing squad. You'd better not keep me waiting——"

"I have my orders. There are no executions to-night."

"Eh?"

"I tell you—no executions!"

Michel did not understand. He did not even listen.

"You let me pass. I'm in a hurry. I'm late. They mustn't begin without me."

The man laughed sullenly.

"They won't begin anyhow. The prisons are empty. I don't know why. If I had my way—but they say there's a General marching on Moscow with an army. There may be a counter-revolution. Some of the leaders have cleared out."

"They are traitors—every one is a traitor," said Michel wildly. "They ought to be shot too. If the prisons are empty I can fill them. I know where to go. Look here, I've done my thirty a night. What do you think of that? Thirty. You can see for yourself I can't do with less—I can't—I can't."

"You're not the only one."

Michel leant against the wall, panting with rage and weakness.

"It's nonsense. You've got to let me pass. We've got to stamp them out like—like vermin. There are hundreds and hundreds of them. I tell you I know where they are.

If no one else will do it, I will. Single-handed. I must. I can't sleep any more."

"You're not the only one," the man repeated in a high hysterical voice.

"They take everything—everything," Michel stammered. "One doesn't know why one is alive." He pressed his hand to his side in anguish. "Where is my brother, Grigory Goubine? If Grigory were here he would send you to the right-about. He wouldn't keep me waiting."

"I don't know where your brother is. He's cleared out. They say he's gone over to the other side. He's a traitor."

"Traitor! Traitor yourself."

"Ah!"

They sprang, snarling at each other. But the sentry stumbled and went down with Michel's knees on his chest and Michel's thumbs on his windpipe. For a minute they remained quite motionless. Then Michel shook himself free and stood up.

There was no one to stop him now. He staggered through the gate and under the black walls of the Nickolai Palace to the barrack square. At every turn he knew that the red flare of the torches must greet him—but at every turn there was only darkness and silence. He shouted Grigory's name, but there was no answer. He beat against the closed doors of the barracks with his hands, but only muffled, sinister echoes came back to him. No one—nothing. And yet Michel knew that he was being watched. The square was full of people—shadows that stared and stared with blank, glazing eyes.

He made a last effort.

"I will wait," he muttered. "They will come soon."

But he knew now that they would never come. He knew that he could not wait. He ran out into the streets again.

He shouted to the passers-by to follow him—that there was treachery on foot—a plot—the enemies of the people were escaping. He stumbled on, screaming, with foam about his mouth.

But no one followed him. The terror-cowed stragglers shrank from him as from a mad dog.

“Bourgeois—all bourgeois,” he thought; “traitors—enemies of the people—must be wiped out—all—all—everything.”

The burning in his side spread over his whole body.

Then a cunning thought came to him. If the others were faint-hearted he at least would be faithful. It was late now. Very dark. He would hide in doorways and shoot down whoever passed. But it was slow work. Like separate drops of water on the lips of a man dying of thirst. There were so few traitors about. He had to hunt through one empty street after another. A footfall was music in his ears. But he had no time to linger. A flash—the dropping of a shadow—and then on again—slinking from doorway to doorway—lightfooted, agile as a panther.

He became aware that a pursuit had been organised against him. He saw no one—heard no one—yet it was there, hot at his heels. He no longer waited in ambush. He ran on, twisting, turning, firing at whatever showed itself—at shadows which no longer fell but followed, joining in with his pursuers. Katya was among them—Katya and his mother—and the bald-headed jeweller, and the little shop-keeper with his surprised, reproachful eyes—and the girl with her mad laugh—even old Fydora. Strive as he might they gained on him. They clamoured to him. At first he could only hear the far-off murmur of their voices, but as they came closer he caught a word here and there. And it seemed that they were not angry with him at all,

They were only begging him to let them help him—to save him—to put an end to all this pain. He did not quite understand what it was they wanted and he was growing very weak. But a kind of exaltation upheld him. He became aware of a great purpose—of a goal towards which he had been travelling from the very beginning—something unclear that was rising before him out of the black mists of suffering and illusion. With every minute it came nearer to him and with it release.

There was no one to stop his entry. The doorway gaped ruin at him. He stumbled along the dark corridor. He was quite close now. The shadows had fallen back and were watching him solemnly. His hand fumbled the wall for the electric switch——

Then he understood. He knew why they had led him there. It was there in front of him—that loathsome thing that he must destroy—that monstrous effigy of cruelty and wrong which had haunted him—that poor, wild-eyed misery.

Michel Goubine fired straight at its breast.

Kayta hiding in her garret, heard the solitary shot. But not till morning broke did she dare leave her refuge. Then in the room where she had first met Michel Goubine, she found him again lying at the foot of the shattered mirror with his broken heart.

III

JOHN PRETTYMAN'S FOURTH DIMENSION

THE sub-editor put his head round the glass door, and having blinked a moment to accustom himself to the murky smoke-laden atmosphere, discovered his quarry at the far end of the room and hailed him derisively. He did not come in further, however, because he was going out to dinner, and dinner meant almost more to him than a sensational crime or a world cataclysm.

"Drop it! Drop it, Young Saunders! We don't want 'em and we won't have 'em! They're a drug on the market. If you've nothing better to do you can write up an obituary notice. Try your hand on J. D. Prettyman. We'll want as much as we can squeeze out of the old devil—two columns—three columns—great national figure and all that—you know."

"But he's not dead," objected Young Saunders from out of the yellow gloom.

"He soon will be—in time for the next issue, please heaven. I don't know what we're going to fill up with if he doesn't. But I had the straight tip from his secretary—can't last another day. Now put your back into it, my boy. 'Tisn't often a cub like you gets the chance to spread himself over three columns——"

He slammed the door and his laugh echoed with Mephistophelian glee down the stone passage.

"Oh, damn! Damn everything!" said Young Saunders.

He let his tip-tilted chair drop forward suddenly so that his grey head came into the dim circle of light, and the loose scraps of paper, littering the desk, rose up like a frightened flock of birds and fluttered down into the darkness. He did not bother to pick them up. For the first time in his life he believed the sub-editor, and for the first time in his life he knew that he was an old man.

But he had a conscience—a rigid sense of duty, and he got up at last and went painfully over to the long shelf above the fireplace. On it, ranged in martial order, stood a set of cardboard files. They were all there, from A to Z. Though he hated them in a vague way, Young Saunders was also rather proud of them. They represented his life's work. Nothing that he had tried to do had come so near completion. He liked it when the sub-editor pointed them out to some chance visitor.

"See these? Unique in Fleet Street, my dear fellow. You can't mention a living celebrity, from a champion house-breaker to Rockefeller, whose story isn't there, ready and waiting. Why, if you were to drop dead now, we'd have your whole criminal career in the press before you'd time to get cold. Try it. You'll see!"

It was one of the sub-editor's standing jokes.

But sometimes, and especially at night, it seemed to Young Saunders that the files had a ghoulish look. They stood there like a row of half-sinister, half-comic Fates, waiting passively for their hour and their victim. It was as though they knew that they had only to wait long enough.

Young Saunders took down the file marked "P" and carried it back to the light. It seemed that the initial was prolific of genius of various calibre, for John Daniel

Prettyman lay deeply embedded in a mass of biography, some of it already crossed through neatly with blue pencil, indicating that so far as this world went there could be nothing more to add. Nevertheless, John Prettyman stood out conspicuously from among his fellows. Three whole pages had been dedicated to him, and the type danced with dates and honours and the long, pompous names of the great companies he had founded. There was really nothing to be done but tack on "We regret to announce," and fill out the facts with a little journalistic padding.

Young Saunders' sensitive, ink-stained finger ran down the list of John Prettyman's activities till it came to the last line and the blank space that waited to be filled. There it lingered wearily. He felt oddly tired and depressed. Usually he enjoyed writing the lives of great people. Their success comforted him for his own failure. It made life worth living and to some extent explicable. Nor was it the cynical cold-bloodedness of his task or the thought of its lonely subject battling for breath amidst his stupendous, useless wealth that troubled him. To Young Saunders, trained in the atmosphere of Fleet Street, such considerations were mawkish and unreasonable. It was rather that suddenly the whole thing had crumbled—turned to dust between his fingers. It was like handling a mummy or the husk of some once living thing whose essence had long since evaporated. Even the man's triumphs had become dull and senseless—no more worth struggling for than Young Saunders' daily bread. And yet to John Prettyman himself they must have been very splendid—they must have meant many hours of golden intoxication.

Young Saunders bent his tired head on his hand and brooded. He wondered which of John Prettyman's exploits

best stood the final test of values—which act of harshness and trickery—and there must have been many behind that smooth, unbroken record—weighed heaviest on him in this last reckoning with life? The three printed pages gave him no answer. And suddenly it became clear to him that the biography which he had compiled so painfully and accurately was simply a sham—that all the biographies were shams and their facts mere trappings of a disguise. The reality was not what a man did but what he felt in the doing—joy or disillusionment, pride or shame. These things Young Saunders knew only of himself, who had no place in the cardboard files—about whom no one else wanted to know anything.

So that the one completed work of his life was at bottom more valueless than the unwanted verses lying in the dust on the floor.

“If only one knew the truth!” he thought wistfully.

“If only for once one could write the truth!”

But then he remembered that John Prettyman might die any minute, and that they would want three columns about him for the next issue, and having chosen out, “It is with deep regret that we have to announce,” as the most suitable of the various orthodox beginnings, sat forward and began to write.

It was eleven o'clock. The released stream of theatre-goers sent a mild backwash up the narrow street below, and amidst the mysterious yet familiar music of footfalls and rumbling traffic the opening of the glass door passed unheard. It was several minutes later that suddenly, for no reason that he knew of, Young Saunders looked back over his shoulder.

The figure standing by the empty fireplace was very small

and still. It must have slipped across the uncarpeted floor as silently as a shadow, and even now as Young Saunders' judgment rallied from the first shock of astonishment, it remained dim and ethereal—a wraith, hovering on the borderland, that a breath might blow back into nothing. But presently it turned and lifted a white face. The face shone in the half darkness. It was so small that it seemed no bigger than a child's.

"I'm sorry"—Young Saunders began, and he did not know that he spoke in an undertone—"I didn't hear anyone come in. May I ask—is there anything I can do—were you sent up here?"

"I found my way. I used to work in this room—years ago."

The voice sounded afar off, yet clear and metallic, like the ringing of a distant bell. The stranger unwound the muffler from about his throat and placed the quaint, old-fashioned top-hat on the shelf beneath the files. He looked at the files long and intently. Young Saunders saw that his head was completely bald and curiously shaped. It was too big for the little face beneath. And though there was something *macabre* about it, it was also very real and unspiritual. It was like a polished skull that a ventriloquist had made to be his sinister plaything. It nodded to itself and tinkled in its distant, silvery voice. "*I began these,*" it said. "It was *my* idea—one of my ideas. A lean finger pointed at the empty space. "'P'—aha—of course—'P'! So *you* write the obituary notices now, do you?"

"Yes," said Young Saunders.

"And you are an old man. In my day they gave the job to the office-cub. It was my job then. Any odd thing they wanted writing up they threw at me. No doubt it is different now—no doubt you are the editor himself!"

He made a jerky, satirical intonation.

"No," said Young Saunders simply. "I am just what you say you were. I have always been the same. As you say, I am an old man now, but I used to be young. They called me 'Young Saunders!' They do now. It's the office joke."

"No good, eh?"

"No good," Young Saunders admitted.

He did not know how he came to answer as he did. The stranger's sneer did not hurt or offend him. He seemed to have lost grip of things. Partly it was because of his weariness and sudden discouragement—partly it was because of the yellow murk which made everything—even his own personality—seem blurred and intangible. As well might a shadow feel anger against a shadow.

The stranger turned and came slowly towards him. He moved noiselessly and very cautiously, as though the strength of each movement had to be measured out. One of the loose scraps of paper still lay on the desk, and he flicked it with his thumb and forefinger.

"Poetry!" he jeered softly. "Poetry! Do they print poetry in the *Argus* these days?"

"No. Only in my spare time—for my own pleasure."

"In my spare time I did things that mattered. Between one obituary notice and another I founded a bogus company—for my own profit—I learnt how to cheat a fool in three languages. That's why I am—what I am. I knew what the world wanted."

"Poetry is as good as this at least," exclaimed Young Saunders bitterly. He beat a thin old fist on the cardboard file. "Poetry has a sort of truth—it comes out of a man's heart—but all this—this humbug—this lying—my whole life long I've been writing lies."

"Lies are what people like best," the other answered unmoved—"pretty lies about dead men." He bent over Young Saunders' shoulder and laid his fleshless hand on John Prettyman's obituary notice. "My name is John Prettyman," he said.

Young Saunders started violently. For a moment he had a fantastic notion that John Prettyman was really dead—that they were both dead and that this scene was some grotesque afterglow of life. At least the face that gleamed close to his in the white circle of light was the face of a dead man. It had the little wizened look, the awful aloofness and impassivity of death. But the narrow eyes under the bony brows stabbed like knives out of darkness. "No—not yet," said John Prettyman softly—"not yet. To-morrow—perhaps—when I am ready. I am very ill—yes—very ill—I have something here—in my right side—but a man controls these things more than you could believe possible, Young Saunders. And I choose my time. Did my secretary tell you I could not last the night? Ah, well, he is in a hurry for the legacy I have not left him, poor fellow. Look out of the window if you don't believe me. There's my carriage waiting—and a nurse and a doctor a Harley Street specialist, Young Saunders, biting his nails and praying to God no one ever hears of it. You see even professional etiquette can bend to certain persuasions." The long thin mouth that for an instant had lengthened out composed itself. John Prettyman took up the three pages of his biography. "I knew that someone would be writing at this to-night," he said, "and I wanted to have a hand in it." He made a curt, authoritative gesture. "Light the fire. It is cold here—deadly cold. I seem to have no limbs left. After all—I am a dying man."

Young Saunders obeyed without answering. He trembled

with a strange excitement. In this same room, where he had spent his life among phantoms, a reality had come to him. He knelt down and held a match to the ugly gas-fire ; the flames leapt at him with a roar.

John Prettyman sat close to the warmth and spread out the three sheets of paper on his gaunt knees. His chin was deeply sunk, and the big leather chair swallowed up his little old body in shadow so that Young Saunders could see nothing but the shining, brutal-looking head, nodding to itself.

"‘We deeply regret to announce,’" John Prettyman read out in a whisper. "Yes—lies—lies—of course—but what do you expect? The truth? And yet you won't like it—aha—I know your sort—you won't like it—you'd rather leave what you have written. You don't like truth any more than the rest of us—you poets. And here—here are facts enough—‘John Daniel Prettyman, born 1887’—That's true—that's not a lie—what more do you want?"

"I should like to know what troubles you to-night," Young Saunders answered. He spoke breathlessly, with an eagerness that sat strangely on his shabby greyness. "Mr. Prettyman—you are an old man—dying, you say, and you have had a wonderful life—everything has gone well with you. And I am an old man, too—not very far from death either—and everything has gone badly with me. When my time comes I know what will weigh heaviest on me—my failure—my inadequacy—the years I have spent in this room—content to paint the husks of other men's lives. But you—what troubles you—now?"

"—‘in poor circumstances,’" John Prettyman read on. His finger that travelled slowly across the page stopped for an instant, and he lifted a face puckered with the effort of remembrance "in a back alley in Seven Dials," he said.

"There were no policemen in those days who would have dared come near my birthplace after dark. I can see now the men who skulked out of the doorways at night and skulked back again before morning—and the fighting—and screaming——" He tittered secretly, and his finger resumed its journey. And thereafter, at each interjection, the thin irony of his voice dropped to a crooning note of triumph. It was as though he hugged each memory passionately to himself—"of honest but undistinguished parents'. That's curious, isn't it? For the law says I had no father. As to my mother—oh, she was honest, no doubt of that—we starved together often enough. And her profession was time-honoured—though she was no good at it. When she had had luck she used to take me round to the pub. at the corner of our street and feed me up like a prince. She'd sit on the other side of the table with her glass of gin beside her—she never seemed to eat herself—laughing and encouraging me. 'Fill up, Johnny,' she'd say. 'You never know when you'll get another chance.' There was a queer, penetrating scent about her, and her face was always thick with paint and powder, so that I often wondered what it was like underneath. But I never knew. 'When you're a rich man we'll do this and that together, Johnny,' she used to say. 'We'll have a fine time then.' I think she knew I'd get on somehow—I think she lived for it—and did many queer things so that I should have a chance. But I cut away from her as soon as I could. She wasn't the sort of woman to drag up where I meant to go, and she knew it. When I began to rise she had the sense to leave me alone. She died a year after I was made director of the Orion Insurance Company—in a hospital. By dint of thrift and intelligence (I won a scholarship when I was twelve, and at night-time, after I'd finished with my books, I'd do a little

book-making among my fellow guttersnipes, or pick a pocket or two to keep things going) I succeeded in obtaining a good education, and at the age of eighteen a position in the offices of the *Argus*. So they boast of that now, do they? Yes—I sat in that very chair and wrote up the lives of celebrated men who were likely to die soon. I began the files and put John Daniel Prettyman in the index. In his leisure hours he made himself master of three languages—and under an assumed name founded the East End Widows' Benevolent Fund. Didn't you know of that, Young Saunders? You don't mention it here. But it was a great scheme—it was the root idea of all my schemes, though not worked out to perfection. At the outbreak of the Great War he threw up his position and enlisted as a private in an infantry regiment—'serving with distinction through the campaigns of 1915-16.'

"That, at any rate, was noble," said Young Saunders from out of the shadow.

John Prettyman turned his strange, sinister-looking head.

"There was no more to be got out of the Benevolent Fund," he answered. "The subscriptions were safe in a foreign bank. It was wiser—if not necessary, for they were a pauper crowd not likely to give trouble—to disappear. At that time the Army offered the best refuge—and I took refuge. That is all."

"Nevertheless you risked your life," said Young Saunders stubbornly.

John Prettyman's underlip stretched to an aloof contemptuous line.

"You seem to merit your nickname," he remarked with pale derision. "Your voice has the authentic thrill of youth. You think you can preserve your ideals and at the same time offer spiritual consolation to a dying, remorse-stricken

old man! Tsch—you don't understand—you will not understand even when I tell you that I knew that I should neither be killed nor wounded—just as certainly as I knew that one day, when I had had enough of life I should let it go—as I shall let it go to-morrow, perhaps—at my own time. I tell you—a man controls these things—if he has only the will—the will to power as they had it in those days——” He broke off. A sudden note of anger, of querulous protest sounded through his senile arrogance. His finger tapped with a kind of bitter accusation on the typed page. “And yet there is something here—here at this point—that frets me—frightens me—like a fatal silly slip in a long sum. I had forgotten it, but two nights ago it came back to me—and I can't rid myself of it. It has driven me out of a comfortable deathbed to—to unburden myself—to find some explanation—some sort of reassurance—coherence.” He stopped and smoothed out the crumpled sheets of paper, and for a moment there was no sound but the thin, hardly drawn breath. But when he spoke again it was with a chill passionlessness. “I have heard of men,” he said, “who, having some physical peculiarity, some abnormal defect or perfection—some interesting variation of a disease, leave their bodies to the doctors to be dissected—as I leave what you may please to call my soul—to you.”

He seemed to grow smaller, to melt more completely into shadow. The papers fluttered off his knees, but he paid no heed to them. Thereafter he sat motionless, and to the listener it was as though the little bell-like voice came from a far distance.

“At first the men in my platoon laughed at me. In the end they were afraid. I am a shrunken old man now, but even in those days I was small and frail-looking—an

unsoldierly figure enough, I daresay. To the great beefy countrymen—my so-called comrades—I was an object of ridicule and pity. They did not understand that the gutter breeds wire and quick wits, and that to me they were just children. And then, of course, there was my name—‘little pretty-pretty man,’ they called after me, and for weeks it kept them amused and good-tempered. And then they began to be puzzled—and a while after that, afraid. They had not much reasoning power between them, but, like animals, they knew instinctively that I had something that they had not—something that made me their master, even though I was in the ranks with them.

“Their drill, that kept them flustered and sweating for days together, was child’s play to me. It has been an axiom of my life that whatever I did I would give my whole mind to it, and whilst the platoon was still forming fours I went on and mastered the most intricate details of modern soldiering. No drill sergeant had to speak to me twice. Even on route marches I used my intelligence, reserving my strength, balancing my equipment, experimenting with my step, so that I out-marched men of twice my muscle. Within a few weeks I was made corporal—for things moved quickly in those short-handed days—and then sergeant. They offered me a commission, but that I refused. I explained respectfully that I was not a gentleman and would be out of my element, and would be of more use where I was. My officers liked me for it—but they also were afraid. They were young fellows who had been given commissions because they came from Eton and Harrow and were supposed therefore to be born leaders of men. But I knew too much for them. In any crisis it was on me they would have to depend—from me they would have to take their orders. And beneath their boyish bearing of authority they were afraid.

"But long before I was made sergeant I had mastered every man in my platoon. I studied them as a clever doctor studies his patients—as a lion tamer the beasts he means to break. I found in each man his secret vice or weakness or shame, and played upon it till he was in my hands. Soldiers are of necessity gamblers, and the gambling spirit was strong among these men. I taught them enough stable lore to whet their appetites, and made their bets for them, and when they lost, lent them money to try their luck again. In the end there was not one who could afford to cross me.

"Yes, there was one man—a hulking giant of a fellow called Sunny Jim, because of his good-tempered cheeriness. But in drink he became a devil and a fool. He knew it and kept clear of temptation as a burnt child keeps clear of fire. For a time I could get no hold on him. He laughed at me long after the others had stopped laughing—and laughed at them for their cowardice. But one night I got him drinking, and on the way back to camp he confided to me something that he had done in civilian life which would have put a halter round his neck if it were known. It had been done in a fit of drunken fury. He boasted about it. But the next day he did not laugh at me any more. He went about like a cowed dog with his tail between his legs.

"They hated me—all of them. Their hatred smouldered ineffectually, because they had no wit to give it expression. Their only idea was brute force, and brute force against me was like a blunderbuss against an automatic. One night things came to a crisis. They taunted each other, till at last they plucked up courage and fell on me. They meant to beat the life out of me, but I shouted a word to Sunny Jim, and he turned on them like a mad beast and fought

them off. He was very strong, but also there was something frantic about him. They never threatened me again.

"Sunny Jim had been the most popular man in the whole regiment. He became my shadow, my bodyguard, my thing, I have heard him crying to himself in the night like a lost child.

"We were sent out in March, 1915, and were in the trenches two weeks after we landed. My company was the smartest, best-disciplined company in the regiment. And yet, strangely enough, it showed up badly in the fighting. No disobedience—no bolting—but just apathy—a sort of stupor. And they were unlucky, too. Men were always getting killed—almost by accident—some piece of carelessness or stupidity—and the new drafts were just as bad. It was as though there was a sort of blight on us—in two months Sunny Jim and I were the only survivors of the original company. Yet we did amazing things together. Night after night we would go over the top with a handful of men trench-raiding or wiring—and whatever we set out to do we did—and more. The other men rarely came back, but *we* came back. I tell you, Young Saunders, a man can control these things. We became famous—we two—and before long I had the V.C. and Sunny Jim the D.C.M. Yet I know that once at least Sunny Jim tried to kill himself.

"It was in the spring of 1916 that the end came. In a big attack at dawn—an utter failure it proved—Jim and I were cut off, and took refuge in a shell crater. We were in the thick of our own barrage, and Jim was badly wounded almost immediately—something spinal, I think it must have been, for he was conscious, but quite helpless. The crater gave us practically no shelter. I dug myself in as

well as I could, and covered myself with Jim's body. I told you—he was a big man.

“An hour afterwards the Germans counter-attacked, and I was taken prisoner. By that time Jim was dead.

“Fifty years ago, when I sat in that chair where you are sitting now, Young Saunders, I did not waste my brain writing poetry that no one wants to read. As you say in your admirable obituary notice, I made myself master of three languages, and German was one of them. I spoke German accurately before I went to the front, and I took every opportunity to converse with our prisoners and perfect my accent. So that I had no difficulty in ingratiating myself with my captors. I told them that I was of German descent on my mother's side—that I had been practically driven into the army by public opinion, and had surrendered as soon as I had the chance. I had torn off my V.C. ribbon and sergeant's stripes, so that they had no reason to suspect me. Also I told them the kind of things they wanted to hear about the English, and they treated me like a comrade.

“None of my fellow-prisoners could speak German. They only knew that I had influence with my guards, and were glad enough of what advantages I thought wise to obtain for them; for after all a man's country is where his business is, and one of these days I would go back to England and these men with me. I even let some of them into the secret of my conduct, and they thought me a devilish clever fellow to cheat the Germans like that. They thought it a good joke. And the Germans, knowing that my usefulness as a spy on the rest depended on the confidence I enjoyed, were careful not to favour me too publicly.

“Altogether it was difficult sometimes not to burst out laughing in all their faces.

"We were sent finally to a prison camp in a little town on the Rhine. The Germans understood how to use their prisoners. We worked. There was a jetty that needed rebuilding, and we were sent out in batches under guard to cut down the necessary timber from the woods that covered the riverside. At first the men stood out against it, thinking we were helping the enemy, but I over-persuaded them, and tempted them with the greater opportunity for escape, and an incipient revolt simmered down. If the Germans had ever doubted my sincerity they believed in me then. Kicks and curses never came my way. I saluted the officers like a born Prussian and the camp commandant smiled at me when he passed.

"Our guards were either old men of the Landsturm or young soldiers who had been wounded and had been put on light duty before going back to the front. Among the latter was my best friend. He was a little fellow, with a fair bullet head and round blue eyes, with an expression in them which I had often seen before among the German soldiers—a look of puzzlement and inexplicable distress. He mixed very little with his own comrades. It was as though he had some secret trouble which he dared not speak of—something of which he was ashamed. But it happened that he guarded my section when we went out to work, and sometimes when I was alone he would come up to me and talk to me. At first it was all very shy and tentative—like a wild animal learning to eat out of one's hand—but there was something desperate in the boy, and I humoured him, and little by little I won his confidence.

"It appeared that he had been badly wounded whilst fighting on the Western Front, but was almost recovered and expecting to be sent back.

"‘And it will be for the last time,’ he said. ‘One

couldn't come through *that* twice.' He stood there, his rifle slung over his shoulder, staring out across the river with God knows what horror in his round, stupid eyes. He seemed to wait for me to say something, but I went on sawing my log, and presently he came a step nearer. 'Is it true that the English kill their prisoners?' he whispered.

"I wanted to laugh. He was so clumsy—so obvious. But I had to be careful. After all, I couldn't be sure that he wasn't set to test me, and his innocence might be part of the disguise.

" 'Sometimes,' I said; 'it depends.'

"He gave a deep sigh, and then, seeing that I had guessed what was in his mind, he frowned and drew himself up and began to march solemnly backwards and forwards among the other prisoners. He did not speak to me again that night. But the next day he came back. It was as though something about me fascinated him against his will. I was working alone on some special job at the time, and he sat down on the trunk of one of the felled trees and watched me.

" 'You're looking better every day,' I said to tease him.

"He nodded.

" 'Yes; they'll be having me up before the doctors soon. They'll want to send me back, and I can't—I can't go.'

"I grinned at him, for 'can't' sounded funny under the circumstances, and he clasped his rough red hands together as though he were praying to me to understand. 'It's not for myself,' he stammered, 'I don't care—I'd as soon be out of it as not. It's for my mother's sake—my poor mother.'

"I laughed outright at that. It was so German—so snivelling.

" 'My God, man,' I said, 'we've all got mothers.'

"‘My mother’s different,’ he answered; ‘my mother’s not a good woman.’ He said it like a child repeating a lesson, and he was trembling with shame and wretchedness and would not look at me. And yet he went on—I think his heart must have been bursting with it all—‘She couldn’t help it. She’s had a hard time. They—someone treated her badly when she was young—and she’s never had a chance since. Everyone’s been against her—the police—everyone—dragging her down every time she tried to make a fresh start—and with a kid to feed and bring up—no—she hadn’t a dog’s chance—but she’s been good to me. And I’ve got to go back—I’ve got to pull her out of it—if I don’t she’ll go down—down—if I’m killed she won’t care.’

"‘Each man for himself,’ I said. And then for some reason or other I told him about Seven Dials and my mother and as much of my life as sounded pathetic and romantic. It amused me, and was good practice for my German. Listening to us you couldn’t have told that I wasn’t a South German like himself. And he listened to me with the great tears in his blue eyes.

"‘My poor comrade!’ he said.

"After that he shared his rations with me, and whenever I was working alone he would come and talk about his mother and his hopes and fears till I knew every corner of his simple soul. And every day I felt the terror growing in him—it was like watching a rabbit in the toils of a huge, indifferent snake.

"And then the last day came. He was not on duty that morning, but he managed to speak to me for a minute through the barbed wire of our camp.

"‘They’ve passed me,’ he said. ‘I’m to have ten days’ leave and then—go back.’ I could never have believed that such a round, stupid face could have betrayed so much.

'I'm to go by to-night's leave train,' he said. 'I'll come and say good-bye. Get somewhere alone if you can.'

"I nodded. It was easy enough for me to arrange. They trusted me, and in any case, hemmed in as we were by the town on one side and the river on the other, there was little chance to escape. I got a job chopping up billets near the water's edge, and it was there, towards dusk, that he found me. He was in full campaigning kit, and looked bigger and older, so that for a minute I hardly knew him. He stood close to me. I can see his solemn young face now, gazing at me from under the shadow of his helmet.

"'I am going to my mother,' he said. 'She has moved to Karlsruhe—only two hours from the Swiss frontier. I shall have ten days with her—and then—then I shan't go back. You understand? I've thought it all out. It will be easy—and when I've got work she'll follow and we'll start afresh—a new life.' He took my hand and clasped it, and I felt that for once he was as steady as a rock. 'You have been a good comrade,' he said. 'Pray for me.'

"'God help you!' I said.

"He turned away, and I swung up my hatchet, and he went down under it like a felled tree."

A smothered exclamation came out of the shadow where Young Saunders sat. John Prettyman drew himself up a little and he was smiling.

"Yes, that took nerve and a sure hand. But, you see, I, too, had thought things out. I had planned every detail, as a general plans out an offensive—I knew just where to hit and how long I must allow for every separate action—and, of course, I counted on my luck—if you like to call it that. No one came. In a quarter of an hour I was in my young German's uniform and in possession of his papers. I dragged his body down to the water's edge weighted it

with an iron block and slipped it over without a splash. A minute or two later I heard the whistle sounding for the call up of the prisoners. I met some of them with their guards straggling back to camp. But no one spoke to me and it was almost night under the trees. The leave train was due in half-an-hour and I made straight for the station. Of course if any of my supposed comrades had been going on furlough at the same time, my position would have been dangerous, but as it happened my little Franz Sebold was the only one from the camp, and I had nothing else to fear.

"For five hours I lay stretched out on the floor of a crowded fourth-class carriage and slept. Yes, I slept quite soundly, though there was hardly room to move and the air was thick with tobacco smoke and the stench of filthy uniforms. My companions had come straight from the front. Some of them were slightly wounded, and lay huddled against the walls, moaning feverishly. The rest were silent and sullen-looking, and took no notice of me. It was like a cattle-truck packed with unhappy animals.

"At one station a guard with an under-officer in charge came to examine our papers. They flashed their lantern on to Franz Sebold's pass and gave it back to me with a grunt.

"*'This is Karlsruhe, sheephead!'*

"I tumbled out, cursing sleepily, and the under-officer came after me. I did not hurry. I yawned and stretched myself.

"*'You're from the Bingen Prisoners' Camp,'* he said; *'we've had word of an escaped prisoner. Know anything of it?'*

"I stood stiffly at attention.

"*'No, Herr Feldwebel. It must have happened after I left.'*

"'Well, if they're all as sleepy there as you are——!' he grumbled.

"But his own joke amused him and he hurried after the guard, laughing and slamming the doors as he went.

"Yes, I have had proud moments in my life, but nothing has ever tasted better than that first day of my escape.

"The new Karlsruhe station was a showy, pretentious building, set well outside the town as though in expectation of some immense development which had never come. It was past three o'clock in the morning when I landed, and pelting with rain, so that I had a dismal walk before I struck a lonely policeman, who directed me to my destination. He seemed in a conversational mood, and I lingered for the pleasure of seeing how little he suspected me.

"'Your Frau Mutter might have chosen a better neighbourhood for herself,' he said gloomily. 'Lüttichstrasse is in the new quarter—and a bad quarter it is too. Before all this Karlsruhe was a self-respecting town where a decent citizen could live peacefully; but now—now what has it become? God knows! *Na*—it's no joke, this war!'

"'The accursed English!' I said.

"'Ah, the accursed English!' he agreed more cheerfully.

"I said 'Good-night' and tramped on my way through the soaking darkness. Even with his directions it was no easy matter to find the Lüttichstrasse. It lay on the far side of the town amidst a maze of black, glowering factories, and unpaved streets, thick in mire. But at least there were people here whom I could question—workpeople whose gaunt faces peered at me through the dim lamplight like tormented spirits from another world—and at last one woman offered to be my guide.

"The Frau Sebold is my neighbour,' she explained,

'She is a new-comer, but I heard to-day that she is expecting her son. You are her son, are you not?'

"'Yes,' I said.

"'She will be glad. She has been waiting all day and night. Look—her lamp is still burning.'

"It was true. A light shone from the lower window of the squalid little house before which we stood, and though there were other lights in the street, this seemed to me different from the rest. Yes, it had a look of great patience—of indomitable patience. It made me smile to myself to think of that for which it waited—of little Franz Sebold lying on his mud-bed.

"The woman left me and I knocked, and a voice cried out shrilly, and a minute later the door flew open. It was dark in the narrow passage. I could only feel something that clung to me—something warm, yet hard and tense—like a frantic animal—that smelt sickly sweet. The door slammed to, and we remained like that, clinging to one another. I could not shake her off—I don't know that I even tried. I was not moved, you understand, but it seemed to me best to let the first force of the storm break, for there was a frightening element in that joy, and though human passion is often ridiculous yet I had learned not to despise it. I know that it can destroy the best laid plans. So I let her cry and laugh against my shoulders.

"'Oh, Franz!' she whispered. 'My little Franz!'

"Then, after a while, she took me by the hand and led me into the room where the light burned, and there we confronted one another. No, though I tell you I was not moved, I have not forgotten her face even now. For, you understand, it was what you would call an evil face—a horrible face. I don't know how old she was. Her hair was a hard gold and her cheeks were painted a crude rose

colour, but she seemed to me as old as death. Little cruel, calculating eyes she had, and a red mouth like a horrid flower.

"And yet, I felt that she had tried desperately to tone herself down—to seem less what she was.

"And she stood there, gaping at me, with the tears drying amidst the paint and powder, and a look of terror in her eyes.

"‘My God!’ she muttered. ‘My God—who are you?’

"‘A friend,’ I answered; ‘your son’s friend.’ She seemed to totter and I caught hold of her, and again I was aware of that cloud of pungent sweetness that hung about her. For a moment I could think of nothing else. ‘Your son sent me to you,’ I said. ‘I have a message——’

"‘Is he safe?’ she asked.

"‘Yes, quite safe. They’ll not send him to the front again. He’s out of their clutches for good and all.’ I let her sink on to one of the hard chairs with which the room was furnished, and taking out Franz Sebold’s papers threw them down on to the table. ‘Your son gave me these so that you should have no doubts. Here are your letters to him. And his leave-ticket. I came on that. I am a deserter too—you can trust me.’

"She clawed the letters over like a hungry vulture.

"‘And Franz?’ she whispered. ‘Franz?’

"‘In Switzerland,’ I said. I held myself with a sort of sturdy reticence as though I were ashamed of my own emotion. ‘We both had had enough of it out there. A friend got hold of a forged passport, and I gave it to your son. It was the safer way, you see. He’ll be across the frontier by now. As soon as the storm blows over he’ll write and send for you——’

"She looked up at me. The film of terror was clearing from her eyes and they were hard and very penetrating.

" 'And you——?' she asked.

"I shrugged my shoulders.

" 'I took Franz's pass. It enabled me to bring you news of him—and I am nearer the frontier than I was. I must make a dash for it.'

" 'It is a great risk,' she said. 'Many have been caught. Why—why did you give up your best chance?'

" 'Your son and I are friends,' I mumbled, 'We fought side by side. And besides, I have no one—no one who cares——'

"I gathered up the papers and made as if to go. Oh, it was like a play—every word and movement thought out and calculated. And she took the cue as though she had been taught the part.

" 'They won't look for you here,' she said. 'They won't look for Franz till his leave expires. By then you may have a better chance than now. I am a stranger here. No one will know that you are not my son——' She stood up and there was real colour in her cheeks, a sort of sullen, eager flush. 'You are my Franz's friend—you—you have risked your life for him—and you see how I have prepared—I shall be alone—if you would stay——' And then as I stared at her in pretended astonishment, the hard sneering look which must have been most natural to her came back into her face. 'You know, perhaps, the sort of women I am,' she said. 'Perhaps you'd rather be shot than be found here——'

"At that I laughed genuinely enough.

" 'If you think that, Mütterchen——' I said. And I swung off Franz Sebold's knapsack and stacked his rifle in the corner and let her carry his soaking greatcoat to the

stove. Yes, it was queer to watch her. Human beings have always interested me—their strangeness is like a riddle with no answer. This woman was evil. Body and soul she was corrupt—worm-eaten to the heart. And yet I saw her rub her painted cheek furtively against my coat-sleeve because some time or other Franz Sebold might have touched it (more than she knew), and when I seated myself at Franz Sebold's place at the table her eyes grew dull again with the pain of seeing me there and her laugh was a poor thing.

"‘In heaven's name, eat it up!’ she said ‘or I'll have the police on me for hoarding.’

"She must have hoarded and scraped and starved and stolen to make that feast. After prison fare I can tell you it tasted good, and I doubt if anyone in Germany could have fared better. And she sat on the other side of the table with a glass of something or other at her elbow and watched me. In repose her face fell into the lines which her life had carved for her. It grew more utterly evil. I thought to myself: ‘If she attracts any man living, it is just because there is not a vice and not a foul corner of human nature which she does not know and understand.’ Afterwards I remembered my own thought.

"At first we were both silent. Though I could feel her eyes on me, I ate like a man obsessed by hunger, and presently she began to talk—to ask questions. And I answered easily enough. It was not for nothing I had worked Franz Sebold's soul dry on those long days in the forest. I knew everything that his friend should know—his past life and his tastes and his hopes and fears. I laughed a little as though struck by a sudden humorous thought.

"‘How cross poor Franz will feel when he hears about this supper!’ I chuckled. ‘He was always telling me about

your Apfelkuchen. He said there was no one in Baden could make it like you do——'

"After that her eyes dropped. I think she forgot me for a time. She sat there sipping the colourless drink beside her, staring at nothing. Only once she looked up to ask me what time Franz's train would cross the frontier, and when I had told I saw how she watched the clock on the shelf like a wolf.

"Presently she got up and lit a candle and opened a door leading into an inner room. She stood on the threshold with the light lifted above her head and peered into the darkness, and I think that again she forgot me.

"‘You will be tired,’ she said at last, ‘and glad to rest. You can sleep here. This is Franz’s room. You see—I have kept it for him.’

"She motioned me to pass her, and then I saw what she meant. The sitting-room was like herself—tawdry, with a veneer that barely covered dirt and hideousness. But this little room was white and very clean and almost empty—just a chair and table with a wash-bowl, and a truckle bed, and a crucifix on the wall. I noticed the crucifix. It seemed that once this woman had believed in something.

"‘Franz’s room,’ she said to herself. ‘Franz’s room——’ And then she looked me straight in the face. ‘Do you think he is safe now?’ she asked. ‘Do you think that I shall ever see him again?’

"‘I am sure that he is safe,’ I answered.

"She stood there, hesitating, trembling a little. I could see her red mouth quiver with the effort to say what was in her mind—or to withhold it—heaven knows, and then, suddenly, roughly, she seized my hand and kissed it and was gone.

"The next morning the sun shone. I had slept well

and late, but when I went into the sitting-room she was waiting for me. In the full light the room looked shabbier—more dissolute—and she herself seemed at once unreal and yet vivid, like a dream of vice that follows one into one's waking hours.

“‘You and I have got to pretend that we are very happy,’ she said. ‘We must seem to be making the most of this time together. Fortunately I have saved a little—I—I shan’t need to work whilst my son is with me.’ And then she laughed.

“But before everything I meant to make my plans. I knew now that I could count on her to do whatever lay in her power, at whatever cost, but her power was obviously limited. Finally we arranged that two days before my leave expired I should make a trip to the German side of Bäle, officially on a farewell visit to a relative of hers there who would provide me with civilian clothes and give me what hints he could as to evading the frontier guards. If I got across—I told her—Franz and I were to meet and send word to her, and then she was to follow. I saw the light flash into her face at that.

“Yes, it was a strange day—strange as any of the days that followed. To avoid the curiosity of neighbours, perhaps because both of us were tormented with uncertainty, we took a tram out to the Durlacher Turm, and climbed through a belt of trees to the orchards that ran along the ridge of the hills down to the Rhine valley. It was spring time, and the fruit trees floated like white clouds against the green. I had never seen fruit trees like that before. They do not grow in Seven Dials nor yet in Fleet Street nor on battlefields, and in these places I had spent my life. They troubled me. I do not know why, but for the first

time in my life I was afraid—not of discovery, but of something vaguer than that—more terrible.

"We were quite alone. At first we hardly spoke. But gradually her thoughts seemed to break from her against her will, and always it was of Franz she spoke—of Franz lying somewhere on his mud bed in the distant river. But it was not Franz or the river which we could see winding through the plain—that troubled me—only the fruit trees. It was strange how much I thought of them—how I think of them even now—after all these years—yes—they were like snow—like snow after the first strong sunshine—white patches of snow lingering on the hillside.

"As she talked she seemed to grow more real—more human. She did not mince along as she had done in the town or peer furtively out of the corners of her eyes. She walked freely with lifted head. And it was always 'When Franz and I did this,' 'When Franz and I do that,' till I forgot that he was dead and believed that one day we should all meet together and celebrate our release—Yes, I made plans with her. I helped her to get work—honest work, you understand, so that she should not be a burden to Franz in his new life. I helped to build up their new home.

"'And you must come and live with us till you have a home of your own,' she said proudly. (Oh, I could see her grow stout and matronly and respectable before my eyes. The paint and powder and cheap finery were, after all, just a masquerade.) 'You will be like a second son to me——' And then she stopped, and I could see that the dream had faded and that she remembered. 'Do you mind my saying that?' she asked timidly.

"'Why should I mind?' I answered.

"We came home together through the dusk, and I began to tell her of my own life. I set my birthplace in a German

gutter, and my career in a German city where I guessed she had never been, but otherwise I changed nothing—pretended nothing. I told her what I meant to make of my life and how it was to be done. A sort of fever of excitement came over me—I had always been reticent and secretive—from fear of ridicule or betrayal—and it was like strong wine to me to talk freely—to show myself without lies or sham to another human being, who would neither ridicule nor betray nor condemn. In the mud where we two came from there is no morality. Men judge each other by one standard—by their submersion or survival. She had gone under, but I was to survive, at all costs. I needed no other justification. I remember telling her about the Widows' Fund, and she weighed the scheme, and appreciated it as I did.

“‘Yes, it's fine to succeed like that,’ she said. We had come out from among the trees, and in a few minutes we should be back again in the narrow Durlacher streets. But where we stood it was very still. The dusk wrapped a sort of grey veil about her so that she was not Franz Sebold's mother—but just any woman—any woman who for that moment I fancied in her place. ‘And I think you will always succeed,’ she said. ‘I think that God will bless you.’

“She said that—to *me*. Because I had saved her son, as she thought. That was enough to reconcile me with God—if he existed.

“And yet I did not laugh.

“Yes, that was a strange day, but not the strangest of them all.

“At night we went to the big Picture Palace in the Kaiserstrasse and saw the Kaiser and all his glittering staff and streams of English prisoners. Among the prisoners I

recognised some of my old comrades, and I had a strange rush of feeling—half of exultation in my own escape—half of anger, so that I wanted to stand up and taunt the hissing, jibing crowd—insult them, make fun of them. My anger frightened me so that I sat with closed eyes and clenched fists till the lights went up. I was glad when we were in the street again. I distrusted myself. I was like a man who feels that he is on the verge of an epileptic seizure.

“Franz Sebold’s mother walked close at my side. She wore a thick veil over her painted face, and men looked after her and at me and smiled furtively. She looked back at them from under her lowered eyelids. But once we were out of the hot, jostling crowd I heard her moaning to herself.

“‘I am a bad woman. Oh, my God, I am a bad woman!’

“‘No worse than thousands who sell themselves in marriage,’ I retorted. ‘In your way you are more honest—if you care for honesty.’

“‘No,’ she answered scornfully. ‘I’ve not been honest. I’ve cheated and ruined other people besides myself. I had no pity.’

“‘What does all that matter anyhow?’ I interrupted. ‘I’m not your judge. My own mother was no better.’

“And then she laid her hard, clutching hand on my arm.

“‘And you will go back to her, won’t you, when you are rich and famous?’ she whispered, and it was as though she pleaded with me for herself. ‘Promise that you will go back. Yes, yes; it is true what you say—we are not worse than others. But we are unhappy like others—we love like others—you must go back.’

“But I was too afraid even to think of what I said.

“‘No,’ I muttered. ‘Each man for himself or we all go under. She’s too far gone. I can’t drag her up with me,

If she cares for me she'll be glad to let me go—with her hanging round my neck I should have no chance.'

"I stopped then. She walked on quietly, but I saw her face under the lamplight. And I thought of a rat I had once seen—dying in the teeth of a snare.

"That night I did not sleep. I could not stay quiet in that bare white room. It seemed to me that I was going to be delirious, and that I must get away at once before it was too late. I dressed and went into the sitting-room. I don't know what I wanted there. The door opposite me stood ajar, and I could see a strip of light shining. I knocked and went in. It was a wretched place, littered with cheap, tarnished rubbish—sticky with that overpowering scent which seemed to haunt me like a ghost. Franz Sebold's mother lay crumpled up on the frowsy bed. Her hair had fallen down, and I could see where the dye had begun to wear away, and the paint had run into a grotesque smear. She did not look at me. She just turned her face to the wall.

"I sat beside her. I held her hand. I held it all through that night. All through that night we did not speak to each other once.

"I had still five days before Franz Sebold's leave came to an end, but I knew that now I must make my dash for the frontier at once. I did not think clearly about it—it was like someone walking at my elbow, warning me. But I did not go. I did not even talk of going. A strange silence fell upon us two. We went about together, and I could see that she was brooding over something, but she gave me no sign of what was in her mind. Then one night—suddenly—she began to talk to me of her own life. Just as I had done to her she talked to me. Without reserve or shame or regret she took up each incident and looked at

it—as one might pick up an old half-forgotten garment that one is going to throw away for ever. And yet—though I knew that she withheld nothing—it was not to my judgment that she appealed.

“When it was all done she stretched her bony, cruel-looking hands to the firelight.

“‘My little Franz!’ she whispered. ‘My little Franz!’

“And so the last night came. The train to Bäle which we had decided on did not leave till eleven o’clock, and as though neither of us could face the stillness of the house we went out together. It was one of those evenings that sometimes break the stormy monotony of early spring—warm and soft as summer—and to celebrate some real or imagined victory a military band was giving a concert in the Stadtgarten. There seemed nothing better for us to do than to go and listen. As we waited at the gates to pay our entrance money, Franz Sebold’s mother read out an official notice—pasted against the wall. The military authorities offered a thousand marks’ reward for the capture of any spy or escaped prisoner of war—they threatened an accomplice with punishments varying between penal servitude and death.

“I saw Franz Sebold’s mother smile wistfully to herself.

“‘With a thousand marks I shouldn’t be a burden,’ she said. ‘I could start afresh.’

“And then, as she spoke, a thought came to me—a thought so mad, so wild that I drove my nails into the palms of my hands in terror.

“I said nothing. We sat together at a round table in the shadow of the gaunt trees and drank our coffee and watched the people go past under the flaring gas jets. I tried to exult over the narrow-waisted dandified officers who brushed against me. I whispered to myself, ‘You pompous fools—if you only knew who touched you.’ But I was like

a man acting a part, before his own soul. Beneath it all everything crumbled and grew black—it seemed as though my very will were slipping through my fingers.

“Suddenly the band began to play. We could not see the musicians, but all around us the people stood still—like a crowd of silent shadows. I did not know what it was they played. It was something slow and very sad. I hated it—I hated it so that I wanted to jump and shout to them to stop—to play something that would make a man’s blood grow hot in his veins. I wanted to make fun of it.

“‘This sentimental, drivelling stuff!’ I said aloud.

“And I looked at Franz Sebold’s mother, but she had not heard. Her hands in the white cotton gloves lay tightly clasped on her lap, and she was crying. The tears rolled quietly down her cheeks. They seemed to come from a bottomless source, and as they fell they washed away the paint and powder, so that at last I saw her as she was—old and tired and pitiful. She made no sound. I do not think she knew she was crying—or where she was. But presently she looked at me, and we got up and went away together in silence as we had come.”

And now John Daniel Prettyman sat forward with his marble hands clasped on the arms of his chair and the fire-light on his face. Death seemed to sink back from him like an ebbing tide. There was living fear in the eyes that frowned passionately on their last picture. He spoke faster—more clearly—rushing to his climax.

“And so we came back to the three rooms in the squalid house. My train started in an hour. By midnight I should be at the frontier—by daybreak, if my luck held, in safety. But what I had to do I did mechanically—because my will

had been set in a certain course, without consciousness, without purpose. I was like a man who sets out on a journey and is overtaken by some devastating sickness. Though his goal may stand for his life's happiness, he forgets it. Nothing matters to him but the moment's misery and the question, 'What shall I do next?' I tried to realise that the next few hours might hold liberty for me—to picture my return to England and the hero's part I meant to play there. It was all dead—unreal—meaningless. What mattered was in this room—between this woman and me—now.

"I watched her in silence as she went about her last preparations. She was not crying any more. I do not think she was a woman who had ever cried much—and I knew, somehow, that she would never cry again—that all the tears she had were gone.

"She put food in my haversack and a little paper packet, and her hand rested on it for a moment.

" 'For Franz,' she said—'for Franz.'

"I put on Franz Sebold's helmet.

" 'You must give it him yourself,' I said between my teeth.

" 'I shall never see Franz again,' she answered. She stood very still—looking at me—not seeing me. I slipped into my harness. I took Franz Sebold's rifle from its corner. The sweat ran down my limbs. My bones seemed to turn to water. 'Tell Franz that I have gone away,' she said. 'Tell him that I am a bad woman—that I never really cared—even for him.' A contraction passed over her face, leaving it with a kind of awful smile. 'I have thought over what you said,' she went on—'and about myself, and I know that it is all quite true. I'm too far gone—too rotten—not worth saving—I should only drag Franz down

with me—and even I can love enough—to be glad to let him go. They—they have offered me a place in a German café in Brussels—and advanced money—it is there in the packet—for Franz—and I'm going. I shan't come back.'

"And then suddenly—it seemed to me—I came to the edge of a precipice—and something unseen—outside myself—thrust me forward—over the brink. I heard myself speaking:—

"‘There was only one thing Franz cared for—he didn't care whether he lived or died—not for himself—it was for your sake—you were all he thought about—you and your salvation. He wanted you to be good—he believed in you. He knew what you'd been through. Yes—he was afraid to die—haunted by the fear of death, because then there would be no one to help you—because then you would go down—not caring. If you fail him now, everything that he lived for and dreamed of will have gone for nothing. He prayed for you. I know you were his first and last thought. In his way he died to save you.

"‘Dead!’ she whispered, ‘dead!’

"‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I was a prisoner of war in his camp. I killed him.’

"I could not see her at first. I was blind with tears. A frightful anguish lifted from me. A hand that had been crushing my throat let go its hold, and I drew my breath with a relief so exquisite that it was sheer happiness—almost beatitude. I knew vaguely that I was lost, but death or freedom meant nothing—my plans—my ambitions—just nothing. It was as though in a moment I had broken through into a new world—with new values—and all that had mattered most to me were just broken toys.

"Then when my eyes cleared I saw her face. And it was not evil. It was full of horror—but also of God knows what

pity—what knowledge and understanding of human sin and wretchedness.

"And I dropped on my knees and hid my face against her and cried and cried.

"So we remained. I don't know for how long. I don't know what passed in her—or in me. We did not speak to one another. But presently she lifted me to my feet. She held the door open.

"And as I stumbled past her she made the sign of the Cross over me."

John Prettyman dropped forward. He seemed suddenly to sink to a grey heap like a fire that has burnt itself out.

"It frightens me," he whispered. "It frightens me."

But at last he stood up. He pointed to the three sheets of paper lying on the floor. "Tell them," he said, "tell them that all that I have done since—all the enterprises which they praise me for are rotten—clever frauds meant to last as long as I did, which will crumble together, when I am dead, like a pack of cards. I have no more need of them. I am proud to think how I have cheated people who counted themselves cunning men and women of the world. Let them know it. I shall bring no libel action. It will be a great chance for you—perhaps afterwards people may even read your poetry. But this—this other thing"—it seemed to Young Saunders, listening from the shadow that now the little distant bell was growing fainter—tolling itself into silence—"this other thing is different—outside the plan of my life—against my beliefs—my purpose—some thing inexplicable—irreconcilable—beyond reason—beyond understanding."

"Perhaps—to-morrow—you will understand," said Young Saunders.

There was no answer. Lost in his own thoughts, Young Saunders did not hear the closing of the glass door. When he looked up the room was empty, and it seemed to him that he had dreamed.

But there was the chair drawn up close to the fire and the three scattered sheets of John Prettyman's obituary notice. And as he listened the quiet street woke to the echo of horses' hoofs and the rumble of a carriage rolling out towards the great thoroughfare beyond.

IV

AN EPISCOPAL SCHERZO

I

THE bishop pirouetted slowly on his heel and surveyed himself from a new angle. He then tried various poses in succession, some of unstudied ease, some dignified and authoritative, and one at least distinctly truculent, with the air of a man not quite certain of his real vocation in life. His eye was critical but not unsatisfied.

"I think, Henrietta," he remarked dreamily, "that if the Kamketchgars saw me now they would be surprised."

Henrietta, who was small and mouse-like by comparison, stood a little in the background and caught glimpses of his reflection whenever she could, which was not often because the bishop's width and height practically filled the looking-glass to its frame. At such times, however, her expression was eloquent of much tenderness, some anxiety and no surprise at all. Even when he doubled his fists and assumed a threatening attitude towards his *vis-à-vis*, she only shook her head as one confronted with a worrying but entirely commonplace phenomena.

"I only hope, Llywelyn dear, that no one will see you," she said. "It would be terrible. Indeed, under the circumstances I'm sure you ought not to go. You know what the Bible says about Cæsar's wife."

But she spoke clearly from a sense of duty and without

hope. It was equally certain that the bishop had not heard her, though he smiled affectionately.

"I never realised before the difference clothes make to a man," he reflected. "I don't believe our psychologists have studied the matter with sufficient seriousness. It's worth studying. I feel its importance in my own flesh. A few minutes ago I was what I am, and now—now I might be pretty well anything——"

"Not *anything*," Henrietta objected mildly.

"Well, no—of course not. But—but—something—different—I can't think what for the moment. It may come to me. And the strange part of it is I feel different. I feel more in touch with life, Henrietta. It's extraordinary. As though my gaiters had been a gulf between me and my fellow-creatures. Perhaps they were. According to my theory they would be. One cannot really speak soul to soul with a fellow who offends one's sartorial sense of fitness. Clothes are a method of self-expression, and a man who wears gaiters and an apron and a curly brimmed hat deliberately dissociates himself from his kind. Henrietta, I believe I am on the track of a new sociological principle——"

"Llywelyn," Henrietta interrupted in the same gentle and hopeless tone, "I do wish you would be careful. We're not in Kamketchgar. People won't understand you as they do there. And it's so important that they should understand. We came all this way to make them understand, didn't we?"

"I have heard people actually complain against modern evening-dress," the bishop pursued, tapping his beautiful shirt front with a proud forefinger. "They call it ugly. But, really, if a man has half a figure—you know, Henrietta, I never thought my bishop's rig-out did me justice. The gaiters may have been well enough. Like the immortal

Willoughby, I have a leg. But the apron—no, the apron was grotesque—really grotesque.”

“I shall wait up for you,” Henrietta said, sighing. “I couldn’t sleep——”

Her husband turned regretfully from the fascinating vision, threw a fur coat over one arm, and adjusted a top-hat with a brisk man-of-the-world tap on the crown.

“You would think they had been made for me,” he declared happily. “There is not a crease anywhere. But, then, Thomas and I are of the same height to an inch. He told me himself that he was considered to have the best figure on the London stage. He did indeed.”

“I have no doubt of it, dear,” Henrietta assented with some bitterness. But the expression on her faded, still charming little face was unchangeably tender and rather wistful. “If only you weren’t going with him!” she lamented to herself.

“But, dear one, I couldn’t go without Thomas. He knows London better than any man living. If I went by myself I should probably end up in an A.B.C. with a glass of milk and a bun, and as much wisdom as I had before.”

“Oh, if only you would,” Henrietta murmured.

“Besides, who should go with me but my own brother?” the bishop asked largely. “Whom else should I trust?”

“There is no one I trust less,” Henrietta objected.

Her husband dropped from his cloud for a moment to consider her with a sorrowful perplexity.

“Henrietta, how unkind—how prejudiced! Because my brother is an actor—a member of a most distinguished and honourable profession—you forget his good heart, his generosity, his impulsiveness.”

“I don’t, Llywelyn. It’s just what worries me. Good-hearted people do get one into such dreadful trouble,”

"Thomas is the only man I know with imagination enough to understand my motive in going," the bishop added. "I shall never forget his sympathy when I told him. You know I was afraid he might laugh—make a joke of it. And that would have hurt me terribly."

"I know, dear, I know. And I do hate your being hurt. And I know you will be."

The bishop shook his head.

"We mustn't be too afraid of pain, Henrietta. Besides, that fellow out in Kamketchgar was quite right. He annoyed me very much at the time—he had a most offensive manner—but as I told him afterwards, his remarks were justified to the hilt."

"Llywelyn, how could you! Such a vulgar, violent man!"

"One must be just even to the vulgar, Henrietta. I remember it was at the service for the new converts, and he stood up in the middle of my address and pointed at me. 'What business have you to talk to these innocent people of civilisation?' he shouted. 'What do you know about it? Have you ever lived in an East End slum? Have you ever been in a West End gambling hell?' Which, of course, was a bad blow for me, Henrietta. Because I never had——"

"I should think not!" Henrietta exclaimed indignantly.

"But now I am going to." The bishop nodded grimly to the gentlemanly reflection, and the Celtic flavouring to his otherwise pellucid English became suddenly more marked. "If ever a man stands up again in my congregation to twit me I shall be able to look him in the face and say: 'Yes—and indeed I have'. I'll have no upstart Saxon telling me I don't know the ways of the devil."

A long restrained tear escaped Henrietta's vigilance and

rolled slowly down her cheek. It had no successors—tears are a luxury, and Henrietta regarded luxuries with suspicion—but it was a large and glittering specimen, and the bishop saw it.

“Henrietta—you’re not—you’re not—I haven’t upset you?”

“A little, dear, just a little.” By standing on tiptoe she managed to put her hands on his shoulders, and the tear finished its undesired existence on the immaculate shirt front. “It’s because I’m so afraid for you. I keep on imagining you in some desperate, wicked place. And you are so chivalrous—so impulsive. You would stand up in their midst and testify against them—I know you would—and—and they might kill you.”

“But, my dear one, that’s nothing new to us, is it? Have you forgotten how they attacked me in the middle of my Lenten sermon? Why, the knife missed my head by an inch.”

“Yes, yes; but that was different. All the Kamketchgar bishops have been murdered. It—it would have been respectable—people would have understood.”

“Henrietta, whenever and wherever we oppose the devil we are respectable,” the bishop answered. “Besides,” he added reminiscently, “it’s always the other fellow who gets killed.”

Henrietta’s sigh was dissatisfied, but she followed him to the door and kissed him. He looked oddly unfamiliar, and the kiss had a distinct flavour of impropriety. When he waved to her from under a lamp at the street corner she even blushed and shook her head in protest. As a born Calvinistic Methodist, Henrietta had never really approved of bishops, and now she was quite sure that if only Llywelyn had followed his father at the Ebenezer Chapel up at Llanbedr *this* at any rate would not have happened.

To belong to the Anglican Church was to be English, and to be English was to be capable of anything.

When the bishop had vanished into the brazen glitter of the adjoining thoroughfare, Henrietta turned back into the hall and shut the door. She shut it firmly, deliberately, as one shutting out a vision of sin. Then she went to the telephone. For a person of her size her bearing was extraordinarily formidable. She liked telephones as little as she liked bishops, and she gave the number severely, as though that too were not all that it might have been.

"Is that the Elysian Theatre? I thank you. Would you be kind enough to tell Mr. Thomas Morgan that his sister-in-law—I beg your pardon. Oh, is that you Thomas?"

"No, my dear old girl, it is not. At birth I may have been afflicted with Thomas Morgan, but by the grace of God and my own unaided efforts I have cast my affliction from me. To the world I am Rhys Glendower. Remember it, dear girl. No actor—not even with my reputation—could survive the Thomas—the Morgan would be his funeral knell."

"You were christened Thomas," said Henrietta, "and I shall call you Thomas."

"Not at all. Don't apologise. It was splendid of you to have rung up. I knew you'd be anxious. I've just this moment come off. I've been superb—simply superb. Not a dry eye in the house. In the last act, when I fall over Juliet's body—you know the part——"

"I do not," Henrietta interrupted sternly. "I rang up about my husband, who has just left me."

Thomas Morgan, alias Glendower, made sympathetic noises, then suddenly he laughed.

"Why, to be sure, I'm to meet him. Promised to trot

out all the sins of London. Fixed up the luridest sort of orgy——”

“Thomas Morgan, I beg of you to be serious. Remember what trouble we are in already. If the Archbishop heard——”

“My dear Henrietta, as a staunch Dissenter I care nought for bishops, arch or otherwise.”

“He wouldn’t understand,” Henrietta persisted desperately. “I don’t think anyone would. Llywelyn is so impulsive—so headstrong. Couldn’t you persuade him—couldn’t you stop him? Couldn’t you tell him there were no such places?”

“Would you have me lie, woman?” Mr. Rhys Glendower demanded indignantly. “And has anyone ever stopped him? I never have. Don’t believe it can be done.”

“But, Thomas, if you knew how anxious I was——”

“No need to be, dear old girl. I shall be there.”

Henrietta winced. Twenty years of the bishop’s society had not acclimatised her to the artistic temperament, and she felt sure that Thomas had been drinking. Nevertheless her own voice became almost mellifluous in its pleading.

“You will take care of him? You know how I trust you.”

“Of course I do. And I’d do anything to please you, Henrietta Bach. But I couldn’t disappoint Llywelyn—couldn’t really. He’s just aching for a bout with the Evil One, the dear fellow. Much better give him his head. He shan’t come to any harm. You know what I am, Henrietta. I am a man of ideas—of infinite resource. And I wouldn’t have my own brother’s beautiful reputation blasted for the whole world.”

“I shall stay awake all night,” Henrietta said brokenly.

"Good! I'll ring up when he's on his way home. But, my poor, dear girl, if you had only been here for the balcony scene! You know, what with my voice and figure——"

Henrietta hung up the receiver.

Since there was nothing better to do and no one to see, she cried bitterly, not unrestrainedly. When she had cried as much as she felt was permissible in a bishop's wife, she put out the lights and pulled back the curtains and, drawing her chair close to the window, sat down.

Very upright, her delicate hands tightly clasped, and her eyes, full of sorrowful patience, bent on the streets of modern Babylon, she sat there, waiting.

II

When Owen Llywelyn-ap-Morgan took orders, Wales definitely lost a champion heavy-weight. It was all there in him—the height, the reach, the muscle, and the spirit. His bullet head, with its upstanding thatch of black hair, the pugnacious nose and square, blue-tinted jowl were perfect. As a prize-fighter he would have been too good to be true.

So he went into the Church.

Possibly the unexpectedly sensitive mouth and mystical grey eyes got him there. But whether they or his superb physique won him his bishopric is more doubtful. History had nothing to relate of the zealous missionary until he threw a murderously-inclined West African chieftain over a six-foot wall and broke his neck and incidentally a very nasty-looking revolt. Then, indeed, it occurred to the authorities that this was a heaven-appointed man.

So Owen Llywelyn-ap-Morgan became Bishop of Kamketchgar.

The Kamketchgars were a dubious race, easily converted,

but given to periodic "rattings" which invariably included a massacre of any white men within a thousand-miles radius. But there was no back-sliding under the new bishop. Kamketchgar, in fact, being climatically delightful, was on the way to becoming a health resort when the dissensions of various rival bodies of Christians, who flourished under the protection of the bishop's strong right arm, began to have an unfortunate influence on the native temper. The Kamketchgars harboured suspicions of a Ju-Ju whose disciples had such a poor opinion of each other, and their distrust found an expression in the knife-throwing incident already related. Fortunately for all parties the knife missed its mark, and the bishop finished a very eloquent sermon. But the next day the missionaries of all the conflicting denominations held a service of complete brotherly concord.

As a result the baffled Kamketchgars simmered down, and several outraged mother-churches sent out post-haste for their erring sons and an explanation. The chief transgressor arrived first, primed with a good conscience, suppressed eloquence, and the energy resulting from three weeks' confinement on the high seas. But things in England move in a dignified and ordered fashion. The ecclesiastical authorities thought that in about six months' time they might begin to go into matters. In the meantime the bishop had better wait. Unfortunately, waiting was a feat the bishop had never accomplished gracefully. And besides there was the good conscience, the unoccupied eloquence, and the general exuberance of homecoming to be contended with.

To some extent this biographical notice may explain how Owen Llywelyn-ap-Morgan, Bishop of Kamketchgar, came to be on the streets of London, close on midnight, wonderfully arrayed, and seeking a new form of devil on his own ground.

III

They met outside Piccadilly tube. Several night revellers, attracted by their unusual appearance, turned to admire them as they proceeded arm-in-arm in the direction of Leicester Square. It did undersized humanity good just to look at them. They were almost beautiful in their largeness—their air of having always occupied the centre of the pavement—and the bishop's borrowed fur coat fairly exhaled opulence. Mr. Rhys Glendower, sensing an appreciative audience, broke off in the middle of a detailed description of the evening's triumph to squeeze his brother's arm.

"You're just perfect, dear fellow. Just perfect. The histrionic talent must run in the family. You don't even look respectable, let alone clerical, which is just as well. At the place I'm taking you to they'd stick a knife into a bishop as soon as they'd pick his pocket—and that's saying something."

The bishop nodded gravely as befitted the prospect. But without knowing it he had not felt so well content since he had left his Kamketchgars to their own unholy devices. The Kamketchgars, in a superlative degree, possessed the quality of making most other things in this life appear flat and insipid by contrast, and in addition the bishop, whose task it was to bring civilisation to dark places, was personally intensely bored by it. But now its monotony was to be broken. A long-looked-for encounter stood at hand. His eye took in the garish lights, the luring gateways to unknown wickedness, the shadowy, white-faced figures that drifted past, with the keen intentness of a soldier measuring his adversary.

"It all looks nice and tidy enough on top," Glendower murmured mysteriously. "I dare say you'd think these crowds were just respectable people on their way home

from the theatres—that everyone was asleep behind those dark windows—and I'm not sure it isn't a cruelty to tear the bandages from your eyes——”

“I've come here to see things as they are,” the bishop interrupted grimly. “And I won't go back until I have seen them.”

“Well, perhaps you're right,” Glendower admitted, “and anyhow I'll keep my promise. To begin with, we'll turn in here if you don't mind. Romeo gives me the deuce of an appetite. I lose myself so completely in the part, you know, that nothing less than steak and onions restores my mental balance. And we have an hour before closing time. Follow me, and I beg of you to show discretion. Though outwardly a restaurant, like any other, this place is frequented by people of the worst character. We shall meet some of them later, and if we were to arouse suspicion——”

He made a sinister, suggestive gesture.

“I shall do nothing foolish,” the bishop assured him simply; “I have faced danger too often to lose my head now.”

“Dear Llywelyn!” his brother murmured with affection. “What a delightful fellow you are. One of the very best. Positively my conscience smites me——”

“It is too late to turn back,” the bishop answered.

This was not to be denied. They had reached the end of the shining corridor, and a uniformed Cerberus had already laid hold of the bishop's fur coat and received his opera hat with obsequious determination. A gentleman in evening-dress appeared from nowhere in particular to assure them that a special table had been reserved. He bowed and smiled repeatedly, and it was evident from his manner that Glendower was a respected and familiar client. To-

wards the bishop his bearing was courteous but more distant.

"If these people are to show themselves in their true light," the bishop reflected cunningly, "they must believe that I am one of them." He did not quite know what one did when one has definitely abandoned virtue, but he thrust his hands into his pockets and hummed an accompaniment to the sweet, insidious music that came to them from behind the drawn curtains. "I hope to goodness there is something fit to drink," he said aloud. "Champagne for choice."

The foreign gentleman rubbed his hands together.

"By all means, monsieur. Cliquot 1907. A magnum, per'aps? I will give ze order at once."

"Make it a bottle," said the bishop carelessly.

The knowledge that he had played up well in the first round helped him to enter the big gilded room with an air of having done nothing better for the last twenty years. In reality the lights, the music bewilderingly interwoven with voices and the clatter of plates, the many tables that seemed to dance round him in a fantastic circle, had a disturbing effect on the bishop's temperament. He felt larger than usual and enormously elated, and at the same time slightly insecure. But it was not till a flimsily-clad Columbine skipped past, throwing him a professional smile en route, that the bishop obviously lost countenance.

"Oh, she's hired by the management," Glendower explained. "It's only a side-line anyhow. Belongs to some gang or other. You'd better send her a box of chocolates. It's the correct thing to do here, and it'll give you an air of verisimilitude."

"Did I—do I—eh?—look so very unnatural?" the bishop asked anxiously.

Glendower screwed in his eye-glass and inspected his brother with genuine admiration.

"The years sit lightly on you, Llywelyn," he said. "As I passed I heard one harpy declare that you were 'just too sweet'. I am accustomed to a certain amount of adulation myself, but I have not your sun-tanned lion-hunter's look. No, there is nothing clerical about you—nothing to be ashamed of."

The bishop overlooked the flippancy. The dancer, pirouetting with due regard for breakages among the tables, became aware of his grave attentiveness, and blushed strenuously. He shook his head, whilst his foot, undetected, beat time to the waltz.

"She doesn't look bad," he reflected wistfully; "just a child."

"You missionary fellows are too accustomed to dealing with crude material," Glendower retorted, helping himself to caviare. "You expect black to be black and white white. Civilisation is only another word for dissimulation. We all try to look what we are not, and some of us succeed. That party on your right, for instance—no, don't turn immediately—might be Surbiton out for its yearly 'do'. Well I know for a fact that two of them have 'done time'. Forgery. The elderly lady with hair parted down the middle and the jet brooch—ten years—passing faked Bank of England notes—a very violent and dangerous character into the bargain——"

"I think that's really tragic," the bishop interrupted. "A very nice-looking old lady; I'm sure with better opportunities——"

"That's your clerical sentimentality, Llywelyn. You simply can't judge. Now there's a man over there I'd like you to notice—yes, with the yellow moustache and the bad

head. A noted crook. The police have been after him for years. Far too clever. Don't stare. We'll be seeing him again. Have some of your champagne, dear fellow."

"I suppose I'd better," the bishop consented doubtfully.

"Much better. It will help you to keep up appearances. We don't want anyone to suspect you. They're naturally rather nervy. Anything might happen to any of them any minute."

"If my Kamketchgars knew there was a place like this in England," said the bishop with sudden bitterness, "they'd be so shocked they'd wipe the lot of us off the face of the earth."

Mr. Glendower shrugged dispassionately.

"I dare say your precious Kamketchgars are just as wicked as they know how to be," he said. "It's all a matter of education——" He broke off, aware of some violent atmospheric upheaval in his immediate neighbourhood, and perceived that his companion's appearance had suddenly completely changed. His expression of rather awed distress had vanished. He sat back, his fists clenched on the table, his shoulders squared, his eyes two points of white-hot anger. "My dear Llywelyn," Glendower began with contrition, "I wouldn't have hurt your feelings for the world. I'm sure under your shepherding the Kamketchgars make the most admirable citizens."

"The cads! The unspeakable cads!" the bishop exclaimed passionately.

"Well," his brother retorted, "you asked me to show you the species. If you wanted angels——"

"Can't they even respect innocency?" the bishop demanded of high heaven. "I should have thought even the blackest-hearted rascal would be moved by such a spectacle."

Here Glendower realised that there was more than the insult to his late flock at the bottom of his companion's wrath. A Mephistophelian simper on the face of the nearest waiter further drew his attention to the fact that within a radius of several tables everyone was smiling. The smile ranged in quality from good-natured amusement through tolerant superiority to acid contempt. And it was not directed against the bishop. Reassured on this point, Glendower followed the direction of the general gaze.

She was quite alone and very young and very pretty.

And she was eating the wrong end of her asparagus.

Mr. Rhys Glendower forgot the bishop, and screwed in a delighted eye-glass. She was like a solitary country flower set in the midst of a cluster of haughty orchids. She was lonely and out of place and delicious as an old-fashioned song. Her clothes were evidently her very best, and to the veriest tyro it was obvious that they had been constructed in some sleepy village whither no fashion of any sort had ever penetrated. They were so utterly wrong that they escaped criticism.

A pair of cotton gloves lay on the table and an absurd satin bag.

She looked at no one. But all the time she was adjusting herself, trying to seem at ease, making jerky, would-be careless movements. And there was something heroic in the way she struggled with the thick white stalks of her asparagus. Because it was evident that she had no confidence in her own procedure. Her small, childish face grew flushed with distress and her hand shook. Once, as though against her will, she glanced up, only to encounter the head waiter's satirical stare. Her eyes dropped instantly, but not long afterwards a slow, ungovernable tear trickled down her cheek.

"Poor child!" Llywelyn-ap-Morgan muttered between his teeth. "Poor child!" Perceiving that his *vis-à-vis's* face reflected the general feeling, he leant forward. "Do you find it funny?" he asked menacingly.

Mr. Rhys Glendower came back to caviare and the bishop. It is probable that he already foresaw danger. At any rate, his tone was distinctly peevish.

"No, I don't," he said, "I think it tragic—with forced asparagus at thirty shillings a bundle. And I do hope, my dear Llywelyn," he added, "that you will do nothing rash."

"I have never done anything rash in my life," the bishop retorted indignantly.

Then he got up and walked across to the forlorn diner.

One does not live among the Kamketchgars without learning to act promptly and with dexterity under all circumstances, and the bishop's manoeuvre was carried out in perfect order. He stood between the girl and the curious, amused watchers and held out his big hand.

"Please to pretend to know me," he said. "And, my dear young lady, try the other end; it's so much nicer."

IV

Her small, shaking hand rested on his for quite a minute. In fact he held on to it firmly and reassuringly because he saw that otherwise the tears would break out in good earnest. All the time he talked to her—of the weather, of the music, of anything that came into his head; he had never lacked either ideas or language. And presently she looked up. She saw that he was larger than any other man in the room—and possibly the fact comforted her, for her quivering lips first steadied and then smiled. It was a very delightful smile—childlike and doubtful and a little mischievous, as

though behind her present grief lay considerable possibilities of mirth. Even her tears twinkled.

"And how was I to know which end would be the right one, whatever?" she said resentfully. "The horrid stuff! I never saw it in all my life before."

"At your age I shouldn't have known either," the bishop admitted. "They didn't grow it in our parts, and if they had I shouldn't have got any."

"And th' peepul laffin' so," she persisted miserably. "Oh, yess—indeed, I know. As though it burnt me all over it wass—and they're laffin' now—that big gentleman with the bald 'ace especially—just dyin' of laffin'."

"Well, I dare say they'll stop in a minut'," the bishop said. He sat down in the vacant place opposite her and folded his arms. He looked steadily at the head waiter, and when that personage abruptly remembered that he had business elsewhere the bishop's eye passed on to the occupants of the next table. The elderly lady with the jet brooch happened to be among them, but she made no stand in the least worthy of her ferocious reputation, and in less than a minute the whole battery was masked and silent. Mr. Rhys Glendower held out longest, partly because he had a genuine right to stare and partly because, as an actor, he was accustomed to keep his countenance under the most trying ordeals. But in the end he too sought refuge in his dinner. "It's all right now," the bishop announced genially. "They won't laugh again, I think."

"That's because they're afraid," she said reverently.

The bishop shook his head.

"The truth is that they aren't nice people at all," he said, "and that this isn't a nice place."

"Oh, but indeed it's a luffy place! I nefer dreamed there could be such a luffy place. All the lights and music and, indeed, it's like fairyland!"

Her piquant little face, with its upturned nose and frame of golden hair, shone with eagerness. The bishop found her very touching.

"Does one usually cry in fairyland?" he asked.

"Oh, that was because it was all so strange; it was silly of me, whatever——"

"No, it wasn't. It was because what I say is true."

"But you are here——"

"Oh, well—as to that, what do you know about me?"

She propped her chin in her hand and looked at him. Her expression was ingenuous and most flattering.

"I think you must be a soldier," she declared at last. "Yess, indeed, a soldier back from the wars. I've seen coloured pictures of soldiers, look you, and they are always big and brown—like you—and fierce."

The bishop's eye that still smouldered challenge and indignation melted.

"Well, perhaps you're right," he said. "At any rate, I'm in the wars sure enough. But shall I guess about you instead? You see, in my profession one learns to read people quickly, and I saw at the first glance that you didn't belong to all this—that without knowing why, you weren't comfortable. I can't help wondering how you come to be here—alone. I should like to help you—in fact, I don't feel I could leave you until I have."

"There's kind you are," she murmured shyly.

The bishop's attention took a leap in a new direction.

"Why, you must be Welsh, too?"

"Ess fey—indeed I am."

"Ydi chwi 'n si ard Cymraeg?" asked the bishop joyfully.

"Ydw—mae 'n dda cael elywed y iaith eto!" she answered, with clasped hands and shining eyes.

The bishop sat back as though to see her better. For a

moment he forgot the lurid surroundings and his Kam-ketchgars and a score of years.

"Why, I was born there!" he declared triumphantly. "At Llanbedr. My father was minister at the Ebenezer Chapel. He wanted me to be minister after him, but I wouldn't, and it nearly broke the old fellow's heart. Dear me, dear me, just hearing you brings it all back—the big mountain and the yellow-faced chapel perched on the top, deacons in their black coats, and the long, long dusty road on Sunday——"

"It was like that at Llancrchymeydd," she broke in eagerly. "The chapel is on a mountain too; we have to walk all the way from the village. One got so tired. It's only a little place, whatever. It seemed so big to me this morning."

"This morning?" the bishop echoed.

A faint trouble crept into her tear-dimmed eyes.

"Oh, perhaps I ought not to have said; I was told not to talk about it to anyone."

"But I'm not anyone." The bishop's smile was very charming. It had all the deliberate guilelessness of a confirmed soul-hunter. "I'm a friend and a fellow-countryman in a strange land. And you're in difficulty."

"Oh, but indeed no—I'm not." She laughed a little and blushed. "I'm to be married."

"Ah!" said the bishop softly and encouragingly.

"To-morrow morning!" She nodded at his astonishment. "Yess, indeed. We have only just arrived, look you, and he brought me in here for supper while he goes to the bishop to buy the licence. And then he's to fetch me and take me for the night to friends." She stretched out her right hand proudly. "He gave me that," she said,

"Ah!" the bishop repeated. He considered the mon-

strous sham emerald respectfully, whilst his mind worked like a pack of hounds in a covert. Things that he had read up on the long voyage home came back to him. As far as theory went he knew the tactics of his enemy by heart. But this was the real warfare—and now it was for him to find the counter move.

He looked up at her with his innocent, delightful smile.

"And now I should like to know whom I have to congratulate?" he said.

"I'm Gwenyth Jones," she answered solemnly, "and to-morrow, look you, I shall be Lady Northstone."

"Ardderchog!" said the bishop. "And how proud your people will be. They will have come a long way to see you married."

She could not hide the flash of distress. Her eyes dropped before his. The hand with the cracker ring trembled as she brushed away an imaginary strand of hair.

"No, indeed, they haven't—they wouldn't. They didn't like him. They didn't approve. They said silly, awful things. They had always lived at Llanerchymeydd, look you. They didn't understand. So—so we ran away."

She shot him another doubtful, anxious glance, but his eyes betrayed neither disgust nor disapproval nor even astonishment. They did not tell her what he thought of a lord who gave his promised lady fake emeralds and left her in dubious restaurants at midnight whilst he went off to buy a licence from a bishop. They were just exceedingly kind.

It was at this point, in fact, that Llywelyn-ap-Morgan proved definitely that ten years of Kamketchgar human nature had not unfitted him for dealing with human nature in general. He did nothing obvious. He made no appeal to her conscience or her common sense. He just said:

"Well, they'll be sad-hearted up at Llanerchymeydd to-night." And left it at that.

But there was more than guile in this masterly reticence. The girl had suddenly ceased to listen to him. Her eyes no longer cared whether he approved or disapproved. They were wide open and full of a proud and joyful recognition. So that the bishop knew that unless some inspiration came to him it was too late.

Lord Northstone proved to be an undersized pink-and-yellow young man. He had protuberant blue eyes, narrow shoulders, and a rather foolish mouth. His clothes were vulgar and in the latest fashion, and the emerald appeared to be a very fair specimen of his taste in jewellery. He looked at the bishop as a mongrel cur looks at the dog in possession of his bone, and the bishop got up and bowed.

"Well—and who the devil are you?" his lordship asked pleasantly.

Not even on the occasion of the West African chieftain's abrupt demise had the bishop showed greater self-possession.

"Permit me to introduce myself, Lord Northstone. Owen Llywelyn at your service. Miss Jones and I happen to be friends and fellow-countrymen, and I ventured to keep her company during your absence, more especially as she was being annoyed by some of the people here. I trust the intrusion is forgiven——"

"Well, I don't know so much."

"And that I may be allowed to offer my best wishes——"

His lordship grunted doubtfully.

"In a little bottle of the best," added the bishop with mellifluous devilment.

And on the flash of the longed-for inspiration he winked. It was a successful wink. From his lonely point of van-

tage Mr. Rhys Glendower witnessed the results with rising anxiety and an admiration for his brother's conduct and appearance which would have been undiluted had it not been for the painful consciousness of the Kamketchgar inquiry, the archbishop and Henrietta hovering menacingly in the background.

The orgy was brief but splendid.

It appeared that among other accomplishments the bishop knew how to tell a funny story. He told it with his elbow on the table and the wine-glass stem twirling delicately between his fingers. His very attitude was ribald. The pink-and-yellow young man roared bovine approval, and the girl smiled palely and a little anxiously. The lady with the jet brooch at the next table wore an expression of disgust.

Mr. Rhys Glendower's dinner was completely spoilt.

As the first lights went out the bishop strolled across to his forsaken mentor. His flushed face and shining eyes promised the worst. His voice, by contrast, was almost shockingly episcopal and authoritative.

"We are going to take these two with us, Thomas," he announced. "I've invited them, and they have accepted. It's a clear case. Nothing but a complete revelation of that fellow's character will save the infatuated girl. I am a judge of character, Thomas, and I know. He is a drunken scoundrel with the worst intentions, and he thinks I'm another. Under our influence he will reveal his true colours before the night is out and to-morrow she will be on her way back to her Welsh mountains, or I'm a Saxon. Waiter—the bill."

"But, my dear Llywelyn, think of your position."

"I do think of it," the bishop answered simply. "And I am doing my best to live up to it. I shall not let that

poor child out of my sight till she is safe—even if I have to go to the devil myself.” He lit a very large cigar with a somewhat conscious air of abandon. “Tell me, Thomas, as one artist to another, dop’t you think I’m rather wonderful?”

Mr. Rhys Glendower’s sardonically set mouth relaxed.

“Wonderfull!” he admitted resignedly. “But I don’t complain. Henrietta warned me that you would be——”

V

Glendower gave the directions, and the taxi man proceeded down deserted and narrow streets which at another time might have excited the bishop’s crusading spirit by their air of skulking wickedness. But the bishop appeared lost to the world. And it must be admitted that though his facetiousness during that long and complicated drive was in itself entirely harmless, the bishop’s general bearing was that of a person of no morals in the first stages of inebriety.

Lord Northstone continued to offer uproarious appreciation, and the girl at his side grew silent—anxiously attentive. Every now and again she lifted a white face to her companion, and her hand slipped into his with an appealing pressure. Once she whispered to him, and her glance travelled across to the bishop, questioningly, as though she were already alarmed and bewildered. These things the bishop, tense and alert as a terrier at a rat hole, noted with machiavellian satisfaction.

And he was so sorry for her that he decided that tomorrow Henrietta and he would take her back to Llanerchymeydd and explain matters. They would throw an episcopal halo round the girlish escapade, and if that did not do, the bishop’s connection with the Ebenezer Chapel might help

to establish friendly relations. The bishop, in fact, was simultaneously performing a work of rescue and reconciliation among his native mountains and telling his best story in a London taxi, when the latter jerked to a violent and disconcerting standstill.

"It's the liveliest den in London," Glendower explained. "And if they do let you in, mind your pockets, that's all."

"Gosh!" said Lord Northstone between respect and incredulity.

They disembarked on a lonely square and before a house that, like its neighbours, appeared wrapped in righteous slumber. When the taxi lights had vanished round the corner Glendower went up the steps and, having made sure that he was unobserved, rapped mysteriously. A square of light shot out into the darkness, and there followed a muttered and protracted argument, during which Lord Northstone and his companion stood close together and whispered.

It was evident that she was dissuading earnestly, and it was no part of the bishop's plan that she should succeed. He laid his hand gently on her arm.

"You're quite safe," he said. "You can trust me."

Whether it was the sound of her native tongue or the look on his face, showing dimly in the lamplight, that comforted her cannot be said. At least her eyes lost their fear. They smiled back at him.

"And indeed I do," she said.

"You can come up," whispered Glendower from the shadows.

They followed close on each other's heels. There was no light in the hall or on the long uncarpeted staircase or in any of the rooms through which they passed. But as each door opened before them a bell pealed through the

erie stillness. The sound had a sinister and menacing quality. It chilled even the bishop's blood, and Lord Northstone laid an angry frightened hand on Glendower's arm.

"What the hell's that row for?" he demanded. "Do they want to raise the dead?"

"In case of a police raid," Glendower whispered back.

"Well, if I wanted the police I'd make a noise something like that."

"Of course, if you're afraid," began Glendower.

"Oh, shut up!" said Lord Northstone between his teeth.

"It's her—the girl—I'm thinking of."

"It would be," murmured the bishop.

Northstone turned in his direction, but a pair of folding doors were flung open by their unseen guide and, as far as the bishop was concerned, he ceased temporarily to exist. He was pushed aside, and the bishop went past him gallantly like a soldier going into action.

It was so exactly as he had imagined it that the scene was almost familiar. The large room, showily yet cheaply furnished, brilliantly lit yet dim and misty with smoke and heat, the long green table under the concentrated glare of electric light, the tense crowd of men and women—it was all like a huge tableau posed by an academician with an eye to the picture of the year. It was so obviously wicked that it was stupid. The very atmosphere tasted evil. It was sticky with scent and the fume of wine. One felt that here at any rate the Devil revealed himself as a vulgar person of no subtlety.

"Messieurs—faites vos jeux!"

The bishop knew what that meant. He knew who the man was with the gaunt intent face and the long greedy rake. And his heart grew hot with pity and incipient rage.

The victims were of all ages. There were young women, bare-shouldered, thickly rouged and powdered to hide their ravaged youth. There were old women, pitiful, hideous husks, living only in the life of their last passion, crouching like hawks over their little piles of gold. And the men leant over them and watched the revolving wheel with a naked, shameless avarice.

From the bar at the far end of the room came subdued laughter and the clink of glasses. But for that and the rustle of gold and paper as it was swept into the bank's rapacious maw there was no other sound. Those grouped round the table were deadly silent.

Llywelyn-ap-Morgan thought remorsefully of his Kam-ketchgars. It seemed to him that even the West African chieftain, by contrast, had been an innocent and gentle creature.

But Lord Northstone had gone to the gaming-table as a needle turns to a magnet, and the bishop came back sternly to his immediate task. For a moment he lost pride in it. It had become almost too easy—unsporting—like trapping a stupid, unwary animal. The pseudo-nobleman's expression itself betrayed him. And best of all—saddest of all—the girl saw it and understood. Not all at once. It came gradually to her—first puzzlement, and then distress, and at last downright fear. There was something tragic about her as she stood there on the edge of the crowd, brows knit, hands clasped, watching the swift disintegration of her idol. Llywelyn-ap-Morgan, being of her race, saw with her, felt with her, until suddenly she turned and came straight to him.

"I don't like it," she said breathlessly. "I don't like it—I don't understand."

"It's not like Llanerchymydd," returned the bishop, dryly and significantly.

She stared at him blankly for an instant. Then her expression changed. Her lips quivered. She seemed on the point of breakdown.

"I want to get away," she stammered.

"If you go with this man to-night you will never get away."

"Oh, please, please help me."

"I'm going to. I promised. You've got to trust me. You must come with me—at once—while there's time."

"I can't—I can't."

"You must. You see for yourself what it means."

She gave an uncontrollable exclamation of distress, and Lord Northstone, who had been watching the roulette with a hypnotised intentness, swung round. He came straight to them—and yet the bishop had a swift, instinctive conviction that it was not fear of losing his prey that brought him. Some other cause was at the root of his alarm, which, for a thorough-paced villain, was almost comic.

"What is it?" he demanded hoarsely. "What's the game? There's something here I don't like—something queer; I haven't liked it from the first. It isn't a proper place——"

"I know—I know," the girl interrupted with intense feeling.

"They're not playing on the straight," Lord Northstone persisted savagely. "They're playing anyhow—all over the shop—like a lot of lunatics—and the money's faked. It's my belief it's a damned trap, and I'm going to get out of it."

He siezed the girl by the wrist, and let go instantly with a gasp of pain.

"And if it is a trap," the bishop demanded loudly, "what right have you to complain, you black-hearted impostor? You set a trap yourself—a trap to catch an innocent, foolish

girl—and you've met your match. In this diabolical plague spot you have betrayed yourself."

"You let she and me go," Lord Northstone wailed wildly and ungrammatically.

"I am not going to let her go."

"So you're after my girl, are you?"

He came for the bishop with a courage which, considering his size, bordered on the heroic. And the bishop, in whom many things, theological and human, had been simmering for some time past, caught him scientifically by the scruff of the neck and flung him deliberately, with the same accuracy with which he had handled the deceased African, over the heads of the players on to the roulette table.

Fortunately, but unexpectedly, the roulette table gave way.

Amidst the hysterical screaming of the women, who rose up like a flock of terrified birds from some unsavoury meal, the cursing of men, and the metallic jingle of money rolling to the farthest corner of the room, there sounded the shrill, persistent clamour of an electric bell.

"The police!"

"For heaven's sake, Llywelyn——"

The bishop threw off his brother's hand.

"I'm glad—I thank God!" he declared exultantly. "It's time this devil's haunt was swept clear."

"You're mad—don't you realise—it means the police court—quod perhaps for the lot of us."

"It's what they deserve." And then Llywelyn-ap-Morgan, Bishop of Kamketchgar, caught sight of Gwenyth Jones, and his righteous fury turned cold with understanding. For she was crying, and her hands were outstretched to him in pitiful, accusing supplication.

"Oh, I trusted you—I did trust you."

"I know," he said, "I know." He looked about him—

at the madly gyrating, panic-stricken crowd fighting its way to the narrow exit at the further end of the room. He had the habit of quick thinking, and his jaw hardened. "Any escape there?" he asked.

Glendower nodded, white to the lips.

"Yes—I believe so—to the roof—fire-escape—but there's no time."

"There will be," said the bishop simply. He pushed Gwenyth Jones into Glendower's arms. "Take care of her," he commanded. "Take her to Henrietta—explain."

The bell sounded almost in their ears. It was evident that the invaders had passed one barrier after another without pause. And the room still seethed with fugitives, frenziedly baulking each other of escape. The bishop gave them no more than one calculating, contemptuous glance. He had met worse villains and respected them. It seemed that civilisation had a demoralising effect—even on born scoundrels. The man at Kamketchgar had been right—ill-mannered no doubt, but right. It was an impertinence to preach at the Kamketchgars when one had a breed like this to deal with at home.

The bishop's brain worked on this thesis whilst he thrust the croupier's rake through the ornate handles of the folding doors. He hooked his arms round the ends of his extemporary pin and set his immense shoulders against the panelling in the nick of time. Under the first onslaught the doors bulged ominously. The bishop took firmer hold and they flattened out. After that he did not appear to move. He held his ground, like some modern-clad Samson, his face grim with effort, the veins of his neck swollen to whip-cord—an heroic if unepiscopal figure.

From the rear of the dwindling crowd Gwenyth Jones looked back at him. And he smiled at her, painfully, but reassuringly.

VI

He removed the obstructing pin suddenly and not entirely without malice. That the enemy may have justice on his side is a point which even a bishop may overlook in the heat of battle.

The inspector, when he had recovered his equilibrium and official dignity, measured the bishop with dispassionate admiration.

"Held us up single-handed, did you?" he asked.

The bishop bowed.

"It's a trick I learnt—where I come from," he explained.

"I see. Bird's flown. Your little roost, I suppose."

"My first visit."

"I believe you. Well, you're a stout fellow and I give you best, but muscle won't help you much at Bow Street. Better come along quiet. I've got five more men downstairs. Pity to smash up any more of the crockery."

"Really, I hate to have given you so much trouble," the bishop assured him. "It's a disgraceful place. It ought never to be allowed." He paused, aware of certain inconsistencies in his position.

"Perhaps this will explain a little," he said unhelpfully.

The inspector's first expression as he fingered the bishop's visiting-card was satirical.

"So likely!" he said. "So very likely!"

"It's so unlikely that you can take it that it's true," the bishop retorted.

This was wisdom. The inspector favoured his captive with a long, considering stare.

"Why, I do seem to know your face," he admitted.

"Seen it somewhere—Scotland Yard—or—or some illustrated paper. Wait a minute—Comecatchyer Enquiry—it had written underneath."

"Kamketchgar," the bishop corrected courteously.

"Well, it'll be some inquiry after this," the inspector remarked.

But his manner changed. It was deferential and impertinent. An ordinary mortal caught red-handed may be an object of sympathy as one man to another, but a bishop in like circumstances is a joke. Llywelyn-ap-Morgan realised, as he caught the faint but malicious flutter of the inspector's eyelid, that he would represent that gentleman's top note in humour for some years to come.

"In any case, I am ready to accompany you," he said, with dignity. "I quite see that some explanation is necessary, and I wish to give it at once."

"We shouldn't dream of troubling your lordship at this hour. Your lordship will be given another opportunity—at the police-court proceedings. I'm afraid your lordship will be sole defendant—having given his friends such a good start." He coughed. "At present there is nothing for me to do but search the premises. I wish your lordship good-night."

The bishop gathered up the fur coat and the remnants of an opera hat.

"And if you should happen to find a girl," he said "quite a young girl, with fair hair and a rather turned-up nose, please let her go. She has nothing to do with this place. I am entirely responsible. I brought her here."

"I take your lordship's word for it," said the inspector wickedly.

With his three constables looming discreetly in the shadow, he tramped back through the deserted passages. But the bishop lingered. With an eye to a strong realistic sermon, he took in the details of the general ruin. Amongst them the smashed roulette table gave him the keenest satisfaction. For a man of his years it had been a wonder-

ful toss. Even that Kamketchgar fellow would have to admit that he knew how to tackle any devil—civilised or uncivilised.

And he had saved the girl from disaster. He had preserved innocence. He had kept his promise.

The archbishop and even Henrietta would see that as a bishop and a gentleman he had done the only possible thing.

It was not till he caught a glimpse of himself in the long glass opposite that he suffered his first doubt as to their verdict. He doubted himself. He had a moment's sickening doubt in his own motives. He did not look like a bishop. He did not look like a gentleman. He looked wild and violent and disreputable. The light of battle still glowed sullenly in his eye. The white shirt front was crumpled to a rag, and the tie stuck up truculently under one ear.

He looked horribly as though he had enjoyed himself.

It was impossible to believe anything but the worst of such a figure.

So that he might never preach again—never scold his Kamketchgars back to the paths of virtue. And he had loved preaching—loved his Kamketchgars.

Well, he had saved the girl, anyhow.

Then out of the shadow a small voice called timidly.

"Mr. Llywelyn—Mr. Llywelyn—please——"

VII

He followed it down a narrow passage and then up an iron ladder on to the roof. And then because he felt suddenly very tired and broken-hearted he sat down beside it in the lee of a monstrous chimney-pot.

"You shouldn't have stayed," he said. "You ran a grave

risk. You should have gone with my brother. Why didn't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"To tell you the truth, I didn't fancy your brother much. When I explained things to him he laughed. I thought he'd fall into the street—seemed to think it funny."

"Thomas would," the bishop admitted wearily. "The poor fellow has to live through so many artificial tragedies that when the reality comes his way he can't believe in it. But you could have trusted him."

She did not answer for a minute. He felt that she was looking at him—trying to see him through the darkness.

"Queer the p'lice didn't follow us up here," she meditated at last. "Must have squared them somehow, didn't you?"

"They—they recognised me."

"Been in trouble before, eh?"

"In a way—yes."

"You're that sort. Always in the soup. I know."

The bishop rubbed his eyes. An odd, charming sense of unreality was creeping over him. He seemed to be looking at things from a new angle and failing painfully to recognise them. London itself was different. From a grimly actual world of bricks and mortar and worrying, scurrying mortals, it had become an Arabian fairy story. A myriad golden genii danced a bewildering dance round its housetops, on which reclined, more or less at their ease, bishops and other usually respectable people. At least to the Bishop of Kamketchgar it seemed impossible that he should be the only one.

As to his companion—she eluded dim. She had become a mystery—an enigma. She slipped—figuratively—through his fingers.

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He sighed and shook himself.

"Anyhow, there's no need for us to sit here in the cold," he said, laying firm hold of common sense. "It's quite safe. I spoke to the inspector, Miss Jones. I told him that you were entirely innocent. He took my word for it."

"Well, I'm not taking his," she remarked. "I'll stay here, if you don't mind. When the milk comes round I'll slip off down the fire escape. Policemen have their hours like other folk, and when the bell rings they down tools and run home to bed. I've had enough shocks for one night, and I'm taking no chances."

"Poor child!" said the bishop gently.

"Oh, never mind me. It's your funeral. And a cheap one, I don't think. 'Obstructing the police in the performance of their duties,' and all that. They'll make out a nice little bill for you, you'll see."

"I dare say I shall." But not for the world would he have told her the real cost. "It was worth it," he added bravely.

She felt for his hand and squeezed it hard.

"You're a sport. I always says myself if I gets my fun I don't mind paying for it. And you've had yours all right. My word, it was a treat just to see you. There isn't another man I know could have done it. You must be strong."

A faint comfort crept round the bishop's tired heart.

"I suppose I am—rather."

"All the same, you ought not to chuck people about like that," she added reprovingly. "You might have broken Jim's neck."

"If Jim is Lord Northstone," said the bishop, "I almost wish I had. He's a bad man."

"He isn't. After all, you were trying to nab his girl."

"I was not."

"Well—now, weren't you? Own up!"

He hedged confusedly.

"Anyhow, my dear child, in my profession one gets to know good from evil at a glance."

She hugged herself.

"Oh, what you know about everything!" she murmured.

The bishop frowned at her. But it was too dark for her to appreciate the effort. And all at once he realised that she was shaking from head to foot. He took off the fur coat and slipped it over her shoulders.

"You're cold."

"I'm not—I'm—— Besides—oh, you go home."

"I'm not going to leave you."

"What—not ever?"

"Not till I've done what I meant to from the beginning. Put you in the first train for Llanerchymydd."

"Oh, Gawd!"

He listened intently, anxiously, but she made no further protest. She crept closer, shifting half the coat back to his shoulders.

"Share and share alike," she murmured. "Honest injun!"

There was a long silence. Presently her head drooped against him, and he put his arm round her, holding her gently. Her sleep was so sweet and untroubled that the tears came to his eyes. She seemed less strange—less unfamiliar. He thought of her people among the Welsh mountains—of Henrietta—all waiting, hoping.

He was very tired—not so young as he was. Life in Kamketchgar was much easier.

Probably the bishop slept.

At least the next thing he knew clearly was that the Arabian fairy story had been told to an end. The curtain

had been rung down and the players were taking off their paint. There was London already in its work-a-day dress—smoky and grey and rather sulky-looking in the chill dawn, like a reveller waking after a long and riotous night out.* And Gwentyth Jones had changed. She had propped a tiny pocket mirror against a chimney-pot and was arranging her golden curls with practised fingers.

Was it part of the disillusionment that the curls seemed less golden?

"Good morning," said the bishop doubtfully.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder.

"Oh, you're awake, are you. Well, don't look, there's a dear. Must have lost my complexion in the scrimmage. Perfect fright aren't I?"

"There's a train to Cardiff at nine o'clock," said the bishop, clutching at reality. "We mustn't miss it."

"A train? Where to?"

"Llanerchymeydd."

"Oh, drop that, I'm too tired." She finished her toilet, yawned and stretched herself, and then came gingerly down the sloping tiles to the bishop's side. She stood there in the gutter, looking down at him. Certainly, now that there were no lights—no music—she looked less child-like. "S'cuse my temper," she said; "it's never rosy in the morning, and it's been a trying night for us all. Anyhow, don't talk to me about Llanerchymeydd. I don't know the place. Never been there and don't want to go. The very name's worn me to a shadow. Fact is, dear old boy, I'm not Welsh. I can't speak Welsh. I've worked up one or two sentences and an accent, and leave the rest to Providence. I can do a Scotch turn and an Irish jig according to requirements. I heard your brother call you Llywelyn, so I had your weak spot at once. See?"

"No—not clearly," said the bishop.

She smiled kindly at him.

"I do a different stunt every time," she went on. "Sometimes it's asparagus I can't manage—sometimes I can't pay my bill—sometimes I lose my way. But I'm always helpless and clinging. Then, when I've hooked the fish, Jim pops up, and either we leads it off gently to a game of poker—among friends, you understand—or there's a row and he pays up for peace and quiet, or we humours him a bit first—like we did you. See now?"

"Good God!"

"And there's no need to call anyone names either," she said severely. "I'm a respectable married woman—out of business hours. Got to make a living like everyone else. And who are you, anyhow? Trying to lure a poor innocent girl off to a gambling hell?"

The bishop buried his face in his hands, and suddenly she sat down beside him. She put her arm over his shoulder and rumbled up his stiff black hair affectionately. "There now, don't you take on! I'm not blaming you—straight I'm not. Bit wuzzy in the head, weren't you? I can guess what it's like, coming home after a spell in some outlandish hole. One's got to go off the rails or bust. I saw you were a good sort at bottom right from the first—though, mind you, I had a bad five minutes in that queer place, and Jim swore you were a police guy doing a new stunt on his own. But you played up fine, and as far as I'm concerned all's forgiven and forgotten, see?"

The bishop looked round at her, and was amazed to see that the carefully-shaded eyelashes had grown moist with tears.

"Oh, I'm always sloppy when I'm tired," she explained. "And you're a dear boy. Quite touching. Now you take

your old mother's advice: Keep off this sort of game. You're past it. With young things it doesn't matter so much. They get over it. But one of these days you'll get into bad hands and stay there. You trot back to your what's-his-name chapel at what's-his-name and live quiet. It pays best in the end."

"And what about you?"

She smiled.

"Well after last night I reckon we'll go into private life. I'm getting too old for shocks, and Jim and I, we've lived sober as judges, so we can afford to retire. A nice little house in Peckham and a pew in the parish church for us."

"I see," said the bishop thoughtfully.

"And I'd like to feel my last job was doing a real Christian deed," she went on; "turning the erring from the path of evil and all that. You've had your lesson, dear boy. Keep out of the soup. Next time a girl don't know which is the right end of her asparagus, you look the other way. Promise?"

"Promise," said the bishop.

"Well—then you can come and see me on my bus. I reckon Jim's just worrying his poor old head off."

The descent down the fire escape was uneventful and unobserved. The bishop, his ruined opera hat under one arm, followed his guide passively. He had almost ceased to think. The process seemed quite useless. But as they stood together at a windy corner one thought did flash upon him.

"Tell me," he said, "why did you wait? Why didn't you escape—when you had the chance—with—with Jim?"

For the first time she did not meet his eye. She was fumbling in her silk bag, and her voice was almost sulky.

"Oh, I don't know. You seemed a good sort—a real

gent. Personally, I like a chap who plays the game. It didn't seem fair—leaving you—like leaving a pal. If they'd nabbed you—or done any rough-housing, I'd have butted in and explained.

“Really?”

She pushed something hard and cold into his hand. Involuntarily he glanced down. It was his gold watch and chain.

“Couldn't keep it—couldn't really—not between friends. So long, dearie.” She skipped lightly on to an empty bus as it rumbled past and blew him a kiss. “No ill-feeling, eh?”

“None,” said the bishop. “None whatever.”

He waved to her as she turned the corner. Considering the circumstances, he felt ridiculously light-hearted—as though amidst the general ruin he had found something of great price.

Yes. The Kamketchgars were perhaps easier to understand.

But civilised or uncivilised, the devil had his points all the world over.

Henrietta had dozed too.

With her patient forehead against the window pane she dreamed a horrible dream. In it the bishop fought single-handed against a crowd of incensed demons, whose fearful scream of victory, contrary to custom, grew louder and more blood-curdling as the helpless witness tore herself back to consciousness.

Ever afterwards Henrietta's distrust of telephones amounted to a religious superstition.

She was stiff with weariness, shaking with premonitions. The receiver beat a tattoo on the wooden box. Her voice was like the twittering of a frightened bird.

"Oh, Thomas—*is* that you?"

"No, Henrietta—not Thomas—even at this hour o' the morning. Is Llywelyn back? No—well, and I don't wonder. Arrested last night in a gambling hell—defying the police—no—no, Henrietta, don't faint—for heaven's sake—it was a fake—all through—best actors in London—perfect stage management—best thing I've ever done—absolute realism—every scene rehearsed—except one—Llywelyn's. Never have told the dear fellow—only there's the devil to pay—Adams' door smashed—half a dozen watches gone—disreputable friends of Llywelyn—you ask him about them—about the little Welsh girl——"

A step, lagging and very weary, sounded in the empty street. The hushed scratching of a latch-key reached the faithful, listening ears.

Mr. Rhys Glendower went on talking, and Henrietta ran out into the hall with outstretched arms.

V

THE BRIDGE ACROSS

I

LIKE a ghost the liner loomed up slowly through the soaking fog. A tug with the pilot on board put off from her side and ran shorewards, puffing noisily with an air of good-humoured self-importance. But its late charge gliding under invisible propulsion up the rain-speckled river had the aloof and tragic look of a fighter who has come back from unspeakable battle. The small fry, dancing on the backwash, eyed her with awe, and the dour, unlovely tramps that lay alongside the quays, with knowledge. They claimed no kinship, but they knew what lay out there beyond the veil of mist and silence.

On deck the crew, preoccupied and alert, wormed themselves in and out among the passengers who eddied ineffectually about the companion-ways, shifting their hand luggage from place to place in unappeasable restlessness. A few of them, with upturned collars, stood by the taffrail and watched their appointed landing-place glide nearer to them. They could already see the dock-workers standing by in readiness and a handful of idlers whose apathetic movements proclaimed the recurrence of something wearisomely commonplace. Behind these midget figures the customs and gaunt mast-heads emerged vaguely and with an air of flat and squalid melancholy.

And suddenly, in spite of himself, one of the little group on deck broke the silence.

"Well, there she is," he said. "There she is at last! The old harridan!"

"Not changed, has she?"

"Not a bit."

"Good old England!"

They laughed at that, but quietly and rather grimly as men do who have made a joke at their own expense. Throughout the voyage they had been very silent, but now the barriers were lowered. It was as though the knowledge that in an hour their fellowship would be over and each of them would go his way in silence, permitted a last brief indulgence of a secret hunger.

"What didn't one expect!"

"Yes—especially at first. I remember I had a sort of idea that everybody in England was thinking about me—that Cabinet Ministers were talking about me—that the whole British Army was wetting its palms on my account. I used to imagine the home-coming—brass bands and crowds, you know—people waving their hats and nudging each other and whispering, 'That's him!' Sounds a little bit light-headed now, doesn't it?"

"Oh, well, we all had it more or less. Perhaps it helped."

"And now here it is—the real thing."

"I don't hear the brass bands, though, do you?"

"No, thank God."

They grinned sardonically yet affectionately at the low shore-line.

"It's a queer business, all the same," the youngest of them went on. "I can't sort of get things clear—can't make up my mind what's real and what isn't—the old times

—or—this—or what's happened in between. I don't seem to know even who I am—or what I'm likely to do next. One's life seems to have been cut into pieces—*islands* as it were—and no communication between 'em—not so much as a telephone."

"Why—I've got a son—running about—going to school—forming his own opinions. And I haven't set eyes on him—and he won't know me from Adam. What the deuce am I going to say to him?"

"I can beat that anyhow. My wife's married to someone else. You see I was missing—for two years. We were madly fond of each other. That's awkward, if you like."

They considered the situation gravely.

"Fact is—the O d Country may be the same, but we've changed—individually—every one of us. And *they* will have changed too. And how the devil are we going to fit in with them—with everything?"

"The Lord knows!"

"Perhaps we'll be wishing ourselves back before we're through."

"Perhaps—the unlucky ones. But on the whole people adjust themselves. I bet that in a fortnight's time most of us will be going about as though nothing had ever happened."

But the first speaker repeated his queer, staccato laugh.

"Anyhow, I never thought it would be like this," he said. "I never thought I'd feel—afraid."

There was one man who, though he remained aloof and silent, in some subtle yet unmistakable way belonged to them. He sat in the shelter of the deck-cabins, huddled up to the chin in wraps and so motionless that people jostled him and remained unconscious of his very existence. His head had fallen forward as though in sleep, but his eyes

were wide open and fixed in an absorbed stare on something in the near distance. There was very little else to be seen of him but these peculiar, fascinated-looking eyes.

The great vessel touched the wooden pillars of her berth with a loving gentleness and the gangways, like eager tentacles, stretched across and laid fast hold of her. But even after the last stragglers had passed over, the man in the chair did not move, and a sailor coming upon him suddenly, stumbled and cursed luridly.

"Isn't yer mother come to fetch yer?" he asked in conclusion and with elaborate sarcasm. "Want someone to carry yer?"

The man divested himself of his wraps, showing first his face and then his whole body. The action was deliberate, like that of a performer displaying something astonishing to his audience.

"As a matter of fact I want two people," he said. "You see, I'm a good weight."

"'Ow—'ow in Gawd's name was I to know?" the sailor stuttered back. "I thought maybe you was asleep. Why didn't you make a row, sir?"

The eyes, lifted from their preoccupied stare to the man's aghast face, showed themselves light-coloured—almost yellow. And they gave an uncanny impression of having suddenly flared up with an indescribable impulse—akin to laughter.

"I didn't think of it," he said. "Where I come from it wasn't healthy to—to make a row."

In the end two sailors carried him across—sedan-chair-wise and not easily, for as he had intimated, he was a big man. And in spite of their best efforts his legs trailed over the ground—grotesquely—like the legs of a broken marionette.

II

The room, unlike most human dwelling-places whose silent language is a pitiless betrayal, spoke well of its owner. It declared a proud need of breadth and height and a passion for strong, abiding things. There was nothing in it that could have been called luxurious or ornamental or consciously beautiful. Much of the furniture was old and, taken individually, ugly. But the whole was young, vigorous, with the austere charm of a well-knit body stripped for battle.

The woman who sat at the big table by the window belonged to her surroundings so that she seemed almost lost amidst them, as a single note seems lost in a fine chord of music. She was not beautiful, judged by any conventional standard, yet she gave the same joy as beauty because of the victorious youth, the untainted health and pride of life which shone out of her.

She was very quiet. Only once she raised her eyes from the yellow strip of paper in her hands to the fading twilight and looked out over the city roofs to St. Paul's, floating like a great galleon on a dark, misty sea. The clamour of the streets rose up to her ceaselessly—the roar of 'buses, the hooting of taxis, the subdued, unbroken undertone of passing feet. And involuntarily a faint smile dawned in her expression, as though the hubbub was to her something familiar, beloved, something attuned to her own spirit which even now she heard joyfully.

Her companion stood opposite her, leaning against the lintel of the window, his arms folded, and watched her. Seeing him, it was easy to understand why the room had had to be spacious and free from little things. For the man was big and dominant and powerful. Even here he had

an air of being impatiently confined—of being still more impatiently silent and inactive.

"Well?" he jerked out at last. "Well—you were expecting it, weren't you?—Hoping for it?"

She seemed to start and shrink a little as though from a sudden, awakening blow.

"I have been expecting it every day," she answered—"every day for three years. It wasn't a hope any more. It wasn't real enough."

"It's real now," he said bluntly.

"It's like waking up from a dream," she said almost to herself, "——to find that the dream has come true——"

He bent towards her, peering at her through the dusk with a direct intentness that would have been brutal had it not been so utterly impersonal.

"I wish I could see your face," he said. "Then I should know what to say to you. But I can't. And I'm not the man to stand here guessing. Nor are you the woman to play a humbugging game with a friend. What does it mean to you—this return—what do you feel?"

She stirred as though, indeed, she had been a sleeper on the brink of consciousness. Her capable, very beautiful hands fluttered out on the table in a gesture that in her was oddly helpless.

"I don't know—I can't tell——"

"That's not like you. I don't even recognise your voice. Of course, one ought to be glad. Mackay was—is a decent fellow. And a first-class secretary. I can remember how savage I was when I heard that he was going. It was such an infernal nuisance—after I had licked him into shape too. And when you offered yourself in his place I took you on in a fit of sheer bad temper. One woman would be as bad as another, I thought. Besides—it was the patriotic thing

to do. I would have laughed in anyone's face if they had told me how it would pan out."

She got up and began to arrange her papers with a mechanical exactitude.

"And I did it to keep things going for him—when he came back. I didn't know that it was the chance I had been waiting for—all my life."

"Jean—why did you marry him?"

She lifted her eyes to his, half in pain, half in resentment, but he did not flinch.

"Why——?"

"I mean—you hardly knew him. How long *did* you know each other? He told me. Was it a month?"

"Nearly. But it all happened in a few days. He had just got his commission and was expecting to go out any minute. And one was so reckless. One snatched at a day's happiness—for fear it might be the last. We snatched too. Afterwards I was glad——"

"Are you glad now?" It was almost dark. He could only see her as a shadow moving across the room to the cupboard where she kept her things. "You're not glad." His big, unmodulated voice pursued her relentlessly. "You're afraid. Then why, in God's name, did you marry him?"

She stopped short, her white hands lifted to her hair, pressing it back from her face as though it troubled her. Even to his blunt fancy there was something forlorn about her—something of a lost child.

"I have forgotten," she said simply and almost humbly. "It is such a long time ago. So much has happened. But I think it was because he was so young and gay and ambitious—so in love with life—so intoxicatingly in love. Yes, I think it must have been just that. And life seemed to love

him too. He was like a strong, beautiful young god—I can remember thinking that quite well—it made one happy just to see him move——”

“And you will always love strong, beautiful things,” he said. He did not speak again until she had reached the door. Then suddenly he strode across to her. “This—this has got to make no difference to us,” he blurted out, between fear and a nascent anger. “You know—you’ve got to stand by me—you’ve got to see this business through. It’s not a personal matter. It’s bigger than any single human being—than a whole herd of human beings. It’s our job—yours and mine—and you dare not fail.”

She lifted her head eagerly. The victorious look of youth and hope brightened through her pallor like a flame.

“I’ll not leave the ship in the storm,” she said, “I couldn’t—I promise you—I’d rather die——”

She gave him her hand in a quick strong pressure and then turned and was gone.

III

The taxi-driver and the passer-by who had been called in to assist set their burden down in the arm-chair gingerly and rather doubtfully. They had the true Cockney’s passion for sentimental romance and they felt cheated. They had expected something different and with such certainty that even now, with a satisfactory tip in hand, they stood there, awkward and open-mouthed, waiting for the drama to unroll itself.

“Thank you,” the woman said gravely, “thank you. Good-night.”

After that there was nothing for it but to go. They went, slamming the door of the little flat behind them.

"As though we'd brought 'er up a bloomin' sack of coals!" the taxi-man grumbled indignantly. "'Wot's wim-min' comin' to?"

The passer-by, who was a great reader of current fiction, was more hopeful.

"Perhaps they're the strong, silent sort," he said. "Can't let 'emself go in public as it were. You bet, they're carryin' on no end now——"

"'Taint natural," the taxi-man persisted, "'Taint natural—not to stare like that——"

For he was obsessed by the picture he had left behind him—of the tall, wonderful-looking girl and of the sinister cripple whom they had brought home to her—confronting one another in utter silence.

And odd y enough the taxi-man's metaphor had flashed through Jean Mackay's mind in the moment when she had tipped him. And there had been something so hideously comic about it that she could have laughed out loud.

And now they were alone.

The man sat stiffly upright in the chair, just as they had placed him, his thin hands clasped on the arms, his head lifted in an attitude of listening. He had not removed his travelling cap and his face was in shadow. But she felt that he was shooting furtive little glances about him—at herself—and that he was waiting for something—some signal. And she could not move. Her first warm impulse had been killed at its birth. She had not recognised him—and she knew by his instinctive recoil that she too was a stranger—at most someone faintly remembered. But to her knowledge she had never seen this man before. And she could only stand there, stammering and helpless.

"Oh, Chris, I'm so awfully sorry. I would have come to meet you—it's too terrible that you should have come

home like this—but we—I only got your telegram half an hour ago—it was sent to the old address——”

“I didn’t know of any other,” he said, “I have just come from there—they sent me on——”

“Then you didn’t get my letters——”

“Oh, yes—I got one two years ago——”

“I’ve only had three from you—all the time—we didn’t know——”

“They weren’t keen on our writing letters,” he said smiling to himself. “They discouraged us. One didn’t like to annoy them.”

He was staring at her directly again and suddenly to her own horror she laughed.

“Oh, Chris—it’s so absurd—so horrible—to stand here—like this—looking at one another—I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I waited so long for you—and now—in a few minutes—you’re there—and I can’t realise it. My dear—take your things off—then I shall see you—and—and realise—and—and—welcome you——”

He lifted his cap.

“I’m sorry, I forgot. I’m not so civilised as I was. Is that better?”

But she did not answer. For she had had for one fleeting instant an intense vision of him as he had been on that last day—it was in Regent Street, she remembered. He had just come out of the Goldsmiths’ Company where he had bought her his regimental badge in an extravagant setting. He was standing on the step—in the sunlight—smiling down at her. He had never seemed so young and splendid.

And now this uncouth man—grizzled, bearded, broken, with the narrowed wolfish eyes, who watched her, waiting for something at which she could not even guess.

She mastered herself desperately. She tried to think of him as a refugee from a distant catastrophe—a stranger claiming her help and pity. Then surely it would be easier. She would find words and gestures less intolerably false. But she could only think of him as her husband and her voice sounded unfamiliar in her own ears. She listened horror-stricken to her own jerky, stilted sentences.

"Chris—poor Chris—I never knew. You never even gave me a hint. You said it was just a little wound——"

He smiled, the same, faint, secretive smile.

"It was—a very little wound. Only unfortunately I caught cold on the top of it with this touch of paralysis as a result. One day I may unexpectedly take up my bed and walk—so a kindly Turkish doctor told me—but it's not likely." He waited for a moment but she did not answer, and his morose, amber-coloured eyes resumed their furtive scrutiny of his surroundings. "So we've neither of us anything to complain of. You've done well for yourself too. I can see that. You've grown even—there's more colour about you. And the place—it's bigger than—than our old rabbit-hutch—much bigger——"

"Yes—it's brighter—there's more light——"

"And more money——"

"I thought I told you in one of my letters—Mr. Tudor had raised my salary——"

"So you're still working with *him*. You've kept my job, after all. You've managed it——"

She could not have masked the joyful, eager flush that answered him. She spoke quietly, but the thrill of those three years was in her voice——

"Yes. I've worked hard. You know, Tudor is Member of Parliament now. And yesterday he introduced a Bill for Reconstruction—for the care of the returned men. It's

only a private bill, but they can see that it's the right thing and the Government may take it up. They will have to in the end. And we worked it out together——"

"That's grand!" he whispered, "that's grand!"

But now she recognised the look that leapt into his eyes. It brought her down as a shot brings down a bird in full flight. It filled her with a sense of personal shame so that instinctively she ran to take him in her arms, to hide his distorted face against her breast. But before she touched him his rigidity broke. He shrank back in his chair, away from her—with a sound like a stifled scream.

"No—no. Don't touch me. I don't want that—do you understand—I don't want it. Leave me alone—for God's sake, leave me alone."

She stood still, aghast and incredulous. More and more the scene was becoming unreal. In a minute she would wake up to her cool, rare peace and loneliness.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to trouble you——"

"Oh, it's for me to apologise." He put up his shaking hand to his mouth as though to hide it. "You did the correct thing——"

"I did not do it because it was correct," she answered proudly, "but because it was natural——"

"The thing that was natural three years ago is not natural now," he said. "That's all there is to it. Still, you meant well. You tried hard and I offer my best thanks."

The sneer had been delivered like a daggert-hrust, but as she turned the bitter answer died on her lips. For she saw a strange new thing in him. She saw that in a moment he had shrunk and shrivelled, that he cowered before her, flinching like a whipped dog. And as though he read her horror in her eyes he beat the arms of his chair, his face all puckered, whimpering in a paroxysm of fretful rage. "Oh,

why in God's name, do you keep me sitting here—staring at me? Let me go, can't you? I'm tired. I'm tired I tell you. I want to sleep—to sleep—I want to go to bed. Why don't you help me——?”

She did not answer. She felt strangely numb, as men do who have received mortal hurt, but also very calm and clear of purpose. She called the servant and between them they half-dragged, half-carried him to her room where she undressed him like a child.

It was only when the task was finished and she looked back for a moment from the threshold at the sleeping man that the numbness left her. And she understood then that it was a stranger who slept there and that he would be with her all her life.

IV.

She opened the door to him and after one glance at her white face he went past her into the sitting-room where Chris Mackay lived every day of his return. He was there now, brooding in his chair by the empty fire-place, but as the newcomer entered he jerked up violently, spasmodically, as though the string of the marionette had been pulled by accident, and then dropped back into a limp heap.

“I can't get up,” he said, “I can't——”

“I know,” Tudor answered. “It's rotten bad luck. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I hadn't an idea. Your wife told me——”

“Did she tell you that I did not want to see you?” Mackay asked.

Tudor shrugged good-humouredly and let the unaccepted hand fall. He stood between Mackay and the window and his big shoulders cut a black square out of the evening light. They threw a shadow over Mackay's face——

"Yes, she did—among other things," he admitted. He smiled across to her where she stood mutely, watching. "And I told her I'd come round at once. What nonsense! What have I done to be ostracized? I rather reckon myself a member of the family. Why, I was your best man——"

"Oh, yes. I remember, people thought it was very condescending of you——"

"Oh, humbug! You're hipped! You've got a bee in your bonnet. You've had a rotten time, of course——"

"No, I have not had a rotten time. I did very well. I want you both to get that into your heads—once and for all. I had an infernally good time. Turkish delight and Turkish baths *ad lib.* And no beastly fighting. Just lounging about all day in one's best clothes. The Turks are decent fellows—fine fellows. I—I tell you—I don't need any of your infernal pity." He looked from one to the other with his yellow, piercing eyes. A little sinister smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "I suppose you've come to offer me my old job," he said abruptly.

Tudor turned away from the crouching figure in the chair. He went over to the mantelshelf and picked up an ornament as though for the moment it had arrested his attention. But the eyes followed him, pitilessly amused.

"Oh, Lord, man, you won't want to think of work yet awhile——"

"Oh, but why not—why not? I've been loafing for three years. I've been longing to work. I used to cheer myself up with what you said just before I went out. 'Mac-kay, your job will be kept open for you—even if I have to put up with your wife as a stop-gap——'"

Tudor laughed out, boisterously.

"Was I so unchivalrous? Well, I didn't know what I was talking about. Your wife has been wonderful. I couldn't have done without her. She's been my partner——!"

"That's splendid—splendid——" He rubbed the arms of his chair with his thin hands in a subdued ecstasy. "Your partner——!"

"I could not have done without her," Tudor repeated heavily and significantly, "and I'm afraid I can't do without her. That's the whole case."

There was a moment's silence. The woman watching in the shadow had exclaimed under her breath as though something that she had seen frightened her. But now she too was quite still. Mackay glanced in her direction.

"I understand," he said, "I understand everything you mean. Yet I prefer to think that you are being just a little flattering. Because my wife and I are leaving London. We shall have nothing but our pension. We have to choose somewhere quiet—very quiet and inexpensive——"

"Your wife will not be poor," Tudor interrupted roughly. "You will have money enough to live here——"

"I do not choose to live here——" His voice had taken a vicious leap forward. He caught it back to a subdued level whilst his eye watched Tudor, smiling. "My wife and I have a great deal of lost time to make up for," he said. "We want to be alone——"

"Oh, for a time—of course—I understand——"

"Not for a time—for always." He continued after a moment with an increased gentleness—"There is a place up in the Fens—an old mill where I lived years ago—when I ran about. Still, I shall be able to see the water from my window. So we are going back there, for good."

The elder man made a last bid for self-mastery. He spoke with the heavy patience which his enemies knew and dreaded.

"I don't think you do understand, Mackay. Your wife isn't my secretary. She is more than that. I said that she

and I were partners and it was less than the truth. Anything that I have been able to do in the last years is due to her. She is the brain—I am the limbs. And we have a big fight before us. It's not an individual matter. It concerns the whole country. It is so big that every sacrifice is justified——”

“Ah—sacrifice——!” He stopped again. He was like an animal that again and again holds itself back from the final spring. “My wife is free to choose,” he said at last.

Tudor turned towards her. She did not speak and the man who had fought his way victoriously through the heat and tumult of a dozen battles knew that in her silence lay defeat.

“Have you chosen?” She nodded and suddenly he broke out in a blaze of thwarted purpose and indignation. “She is *not* free to choose. She is being driven. You are making a damnable use of your infirmity, Mackay——”

“John—for pity's sake——”

“I say it—and it's true——”

Mackay beat his hands on the chair arms. He leant forward, his dark, bearded face terribly convulsed.

“And you take a damnable advantage of your strength,” he stammered. “If I could stand upright you would not have dared——” His voice broke, rising to a scream. “Go—go—if you have a shred of decent feeling left in you—get out here before I want to kill you—you—you cur!”

Instinctively Tudor's clenched hand went up. But in the same instant he saw what Jean Mackay had seen once before—the sudden abject cringing—the utter pitiful collapse. He turned away calmed and contemptuous. “God pity you!” he said to her.

She followed him to the outer door. She did not speak to him. She had a shattered, humbled look which stung

him to one savage reproach. "You broke your promise for *that*," he said. "You've turned traitor for that *thing*. As though the world could stand still for *that*!" He shook himself as a big dog shakes off the water of a dirty, stagnant pool. "But you'll not bear it," he exulted. "You're too young and fine and keen. You'll come back. You've got to and you know it. One day, when you've had your fling, I'll send for you and you'll come. We belong together——"

He went on down the stairs. He knew that she had not closed the door—that she still stood there in the dusk. And he knew too, with a thrill of triumph, that she was crying bitterly.

V

For six months she had held out. Yet every day had seemed inevitably the last. She had never risen and gone over to her window and looked out over the desolate waste of flat, wet, shimmering land but she had told herself that to-morrow she would be gone. And at night-time, through the incessant murmur of the river as it flowed past, she heard the old blood-stirring call of life and action—the bustle of the beloved streets, the harsh clamour of a lusty, striving world, claiming her power and youth, and knew that to-morrow she would answer.

And the next day she would go across to the stranger's room, and wash and dress him and drag him across in his wheel-chair to the sitting-room window from whence he could watch the river slipping away between its low banks. And all day long she waited in the drear silence for his querulous demands and for the hour when she should drag him back to his room and wash and undress him and leave him sleeping.

They rarely spoke to one another. He sat there throughout the day, sunk in a black brooding from which sometimes he would wake to watch her. And she herself would start out of her dreams to the consciousness of his scrutiny and to an uneasy questioning. What lay behind those furtive eyes? Madness—terror or sheer hatred? She did not know. But more and more often an answering flame of revolt burnt up in her.

"A servant is all he needs," she told herself, "and he chains me here. He is a devil. If I stay I shall become mad and bad. I shall want to kill him."

She began to wish that he would die. In the stifling silence strange and awful thoughts came to her and would not be denied. She fought them and in the struggle they became more definite. And all her stifled youth and joy of life and endeavour clamoured to her to be gone—to save her soul alive.

And at such times when the urge was most passionate she noticed that his hands tightened on the arms of his chair till the knuckles were white as ivory and that his eyes never let go their hold on her——

As though he knew——

VI

"It was like that, once, when I was a boy," he said suddenly. "The clouds hung just as they are now, so that you felt you could touch them with your hand. And it rained. The next day the river burst its banks up at Erey and swept the whole countryside. In the hollow here it was like a maelstrom. The old mill shook so that my father thought our last hour had come. But I laughed, I was just a boy. To me it was an adventure."

She left her thoughts to listen to him. She knew that

to-day a definite summons would come to her. It seemed to her that already she heard the footsteps of a great event coming to her through the grey, rain-soaked silences. But something in his voice startled her. It was vaguely familiar—it was as though she had heard a bar of an old, half-forgotten song—as though for a moment obscuring mists had thinned and she had caught a glimpse of a place where she had once been happy.

She looked at him and then past him out of the window.

"It hasn't stopped raining for three days now," she said. "The wooden bridge is awash already."

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she smiled palely. "I am a strong swimmer, I am not afraid——"

He laughed to himself.

"That is fortunate for you at any rate. Perhaps it would be a way out for you."

"When the time comes I shall find my own way," she answered.

He looked up sharply. She stood far back in the gloomy room, deep in the black tide of shadow, but at that moment she seemed to shine out radiantly like a bright, cold flame. He flinched, drawing back into himself.

"Yes, you are very strong," he muttered. "Young and fine—and ruthless. Yes—that's what he meant. And so when he calls, you will go back——"

She frowned a little, catching an echo in his words. But then again her attention slipped away from him. For she had seen old Andrews, the postman, fighting his way through the deluge. He looked like a poor, half-drowned scarecrow as he clambered up the wooden steps of the mill, his dripping trousers flapping against his thin legs, the rain running off his cap in rivulets. Jean Mackay went out

into the passage and the man seated by the window heard the bolts drawn and the sound of voices. He leant forward in his chair so that he could hear them better. Old Andrews sounded querulous and overwrought with fatigue.

"Why, yes, it isn't often I comes these ways—and for a bit of a letter like that too! But maybe, as you don't get many, you'll be glad of it. I hope so. Three miles through this rain comes hard on an old man——"

He did not hear her answer. But his hands clenched themselves bloodless as he listened to her silence. Then old Andrews broke in again,

"Well—I'll be getting along, Missus, unless you've an answer you'd like me to take with me."

"I shall take it myself," she answered slowly.

"Well—I'd have an eye on that boat of yours, if I were you. Maybe you'll be wanting it before the night's out. The river has a nasty look and this is a rickety old place. I mind when it was nearly swept away—like a matchbox. That was when Master Chris was a little boy—runnin' and leapin'—as pretty a little chap as you could wish. And when we came to fetch them off on the raft he laughed and splashed the water with his hands. He wasn't afraid—no more than a trout in a stream——"

"That's a long time ago, Andrews."

"Aye, I'm an old man now. And three miles back through the rain——! Well, thank 'ee, missus. And have an eye to that there boat of yours——"

He went down the wooden steps, stiff-kneed and awkward, and the ceaseless downpour swept him away like straw into the greyness.

Chris Mackay listened. He sat stiffly upright, his uncouth, savage-looking head lifted. He heard the rip of a torn envelope and once the rustle of a turned leaf. And

then again silence. He could see her, standing with her back to the closed door—staring ahead. He could see the heave of her breast with the quick-drawn breath.

Presently she went upstairs to her room. Overhead she moved to and fro, to and fro, ceaselessly, monotonously like some trapped, caged thing of the forest.

“Jean”—he muttered—“Jean——”

The time stole by leadenly. Though it was still early, the room was full of twilight. He looked about him, his eyes wide open. They were not furtive now but full of a shameless desperate fear. They were the eyes of a child in the clutch of hysterical night terrors. And strange, broken sounds escaped his compressed lips. “Jean—Jean—you mustn’t go—listen—I’ve something I want to tell you—I never told you before—but now—I’ve got to—for you mustn’t go——”

The pacing overhead had stopped. There was something final in the silence—something decisive. The man sank his face in his shaking hands. “Jean—Jean—listen——”

The footsteps began again. They hurried now—as if the door of the cage had been opened and the trapped forest thing came out into freedom.

Chris Mackay started upright. He tried to turn the wheels of his chair with his hands, but it was a stiff, old-fashioned contrivance and moreover he had never tried before. The chair moved a little and then ran him grotesquely against the wall. He pushed himself free and sliding out on to the floor began to crawl forward on his hands, his pitiful legs trailing behind him like the legs of an injured dog. He was sobbing harshly—and once he lay still face downwards as though hiding from his own shame. But in the end he reached the bureau in the corner of the room and like a drowning man dragged himself up and

tugged open the lower drawer. His hand was groping in its depths when the footsteps came on down the stairs, resolute and strong and eager. He turned—gasping. He seemed to make one supreme effort to rise up and face her. But he could not. She stood in the doorway, looking about her, frowning.

"Chris! Where are you, Chris?" She saw him then and the moment's trouble died out of her face. She laughed. It was a nervous, mirthless laugh enough, but it fell on the man huddled against the wall like a whip of ridicule. "Why, what are you doing—how did you get there——?" He did not answer. The grey sweat ran down his cheeks like tears. His right hand was hidden under him. "Let me help you," she said coldly and quietly. "You oughtn't to try and do things like that. You might have hurt yourself——"

"Keep back!" he whispered.

"But you can't stay there——"

"Where are you going?"

She stopped mid-way. For she saw that now he neither cringed nor flinched. He had become terrible. He lay there crouching, waiting like a hunted animal driven to a last desperate stand.

"I'm going to the village."

"In this storm——?"

"I am not afraid of the storm."

"What do you want there?"

"I have business——"

"You are going to Tudor——"

"I am going to see him."

"He sent for you and you are going—as he said you would——"

"I must see him——"

"And you will not come back——"

She paused an instant.

"For a time at least——"

"But in the end—you'll leave me—to rot here——"

She made a proud gesture of denial.

"You know I wouldn't do that. I'd find someone——"

"A servant——"

"Why not? It's all you need——"

A muffled cry broke from him.

"By God—you shan't go—you shan't go——"

Then suddenly the flood that had been rising stealthily in the dark silence of these months burst its dam. The feverish eager flush in her cheeks blazed into flaming anger.

"You can't stop me again, Chris. You stopped me once because I was dazed—I couldn't see clear. Now I know. You can't stop me. I've tried to stay. But it's no good. It's not even right. You're one man—and I've got my work—out there. I've got to do it. It's my work—and I know it—and that's why I'm going mad here—with you. If we'd loved each other it might be different—you would be different—you wouldn't have claimed so much—you would have played fair. But we don't love each other. It's all dead and gone. We're strangers—tied together like galley-slaves—we hate each other——"

"You did love me," he cried out. "Don't you remember—that last day——"

"Chris—we're different people now——"

"Yes—I'm different. I'm a cripple. I make you laugh——"

"Hush—you have no right to say that——"

"I have a right. It's true. I've heard you laugh—you lived in ease and content whilst I festered in hell—you took

my job from me—you are strong and young, whilst I—I am *this*—you are leaving me as you wouldn't leave a dog—for that man—and you laugh——” He dragged himself up, his back to the wall. “But you shan't go—by God, you shan't——”

“You can't stop me, Chris——”

His hand jerked up. She was at the door when the thing he had held concealed exploded with a sharp, deafening report. The noise of it seemed to fill the room with a dull cloud which thinned slowly, leaving them face to face, staring at one another. At first only bewilderment—sheer incredulity were in her eyes—but in the end, horror. She turned. He heard her stumble along the passage—the rasp of bolts—the clang of the outer door as it swung to.

Then he fired—again and again—wildly, purposelessly, till the last shot was gone, and in silence he pitched forward, his face buried in his arms.

VII.

At first she did not know what had happened. The river was at her feet before a blind instinct of self-preservation released her, giving her over to full consciousness. She stopped then and looked back the way she had come. For a minute the rain had ceased and a transient gleam of sunlight merged land and sky and water into a glittering deceptive mist, through which grey wraiths drifted with a fantastic semblance of realities. Amidst them she seemed to see the desolate, tragic house she had left for ever, the shadowy room—the sinister figure of hate and madness, coiled in the dusk, waiting to fling itself upon her. She had not been afraid—she was not afraid now. But the strong earth had been torn from under her feet. She had been flung down from the clear, serene heights from which she had viewed

life into the seething mysteries of human degradation. Men could become like that—men who had been chivalrous and generous and brave could become like that—— The gulf between good and evil could be taken in a man's stride.

She went on slowly. The water slushed over her feet. She knew now that she was hurt. There was a dull, hot sensation in her right shoulder and the mists were closing in about her, weaving themselves into her thoughts. But as yet no pain. She crossed over the wooden bridge to where the boat lay moored to the dwarf willow-tree. Her strength seemed to be flowing from her like the stream. But she knew that if she got into the boat it would be carried down to the village—and there Tudor waited for her. Then it would be all right. She would go back to her work—to her ambitions—and forget.

She was struggling with the mooring rope when she knew that the night was coming. It became dark so that she could not see her hands—her very purpose went down in darkness. She could only hear the murmur and gurgle of the water—the first sigh of a suddenly risen wind. Then these, too, faded and went out.

When she awoke it was to the knowledge of pain.

In her night Pain flickered. It was a great red burning torch and by its light she saw that she was lying in the midst of a vast desert—alone. Her loneliness ate at her very heart. It was so awful that the tears that came to her were red-hot. They scalded the rims of her eyes and would not flow. It was a loneliness that separated her from all life. For there were people in the desert. They came and looked at her curiously and laughed and went away again. Sometimes when they came they took the red torch and drove it against her shoulder, and when she screamed they laughed.

"It is only a little wound," they said—"only a little wound——"

Her limbs were twisted up underneath her. They were bound with ropes so that she could not move and the men who came tightened the knots so that her struggles availed her nothing. The ropes gnawed into her flesh, and her tongue grew dry and swollen with thirst and her soundless screaming.

In all the desert place there was no pity.

And the torch grew redder. From her shoulder the flame of it spread over her whole body. It was burning her up, mind and soul. Her courage shrivelled in it so that she cringed and whimpered. All the fineness and pride in her was dead. There was nothing left of her but an animal terror.

Then they cut her bonds. They put water just beyond her reach. She tried to struggle towards it, but her limbs were lifeless. She went crawling and writhing over the ground like a wretched, half-dead grass-snake—grotesquely, comically. And the strange men stood by and laughed. And always they pushed the water a little further off, till at last she dropped on her face, crying her red-hot tears of degradation and despair.

She woke to the rain which was beating down on her and to the sound of water and a great rushing wind. But it was only for a moment. Then she was back in the desert again with the light from the torch blazing stronger and higher. The strange men had gone. The faces that came and peered at her were the faces of people whom she had known and loved. There was Chris among them. He seemed to have grown taller—finer-looking, and there was a puzzled, hurt expression on his handsome face.

"But she is quite different," he said. "We're different people now——"

"We can't wait," John Tudor said in a towering rage. "The world can't stand still for *that*!"

He went off indignantly, but Chris lingered. He seemed to be trying to subdue his look of horror and distress. He tried to smile at her. But his smile was a grimace. It awakened murder in her heart. And when he brought the water to her cracked lips she pushed it away. Because of the shame of her broken, useless body, she tried to dig herself into the sand to escape the pity in his eyes. But she could not. She sat up and laughed and gibed at him.

"It's only a little wound—and I've had a good time—I don't need your pity——"

And then it all began again—the night—the strange faces—the flaming anguish in the desert—an endless, pitilessly revolving wheel.

VIII

The mingled thunder of wind and water was like the shout of an army that has flung down the last defence and rushes headlong to victory. Everything had been swept away—all but the boat which swung madly from its submerged moorings, its gunwales awash, the furious stream leaping from its prow like flying, phosphorescent ghosts. And it was almost dark. Night, crawling stealthily over the Fens began to blot out the shimmer of endless water.

Jean Mackay undid the rope that still held the boat to the willow tree. The rope was sodden and she was very weak so that it took her a long time, and when it was done the torrent seized her, and swinging her round dizzily, swept her headlong down stream. She took out one of the oars and with her left arm forced her way across the torrent.

The bridge had vanished. She could only guess her direction from the drowning trees. And pain devoured her. But it was no longer an enemy. It was a voice speaking to her out of the storm.

“Oh, God!” she prayed in her anguish, “oh, God!”

Through the dusk a light glimmered. It was the lamp in his window where he sat day after day, watching.

She took up the second oar and rowed with her last strength. She felt the blood leap from her wound like a living thing.

IX

The shattered, bullet-riddled door swung open in the gale. The storm shook the old rafters as a cat shakes its prey, and the walls creaked and groaned as the flood swirled against them, seeking their entry.

She stood for a moment, leaning against the lintel, looking at him. He had dragged himself back to his table and had been writing. A sheet of half-covered paper had fallen on the floor as though swept away by a movement of despair. But now he lay face downwards, his arms outstretched, and cried. And his crying was no longer pitiable and contemptible. It was very terrible. It was a laying bare of the man's soul.

“Chris!” she whispered, “Chris——”

He did not answer—did not lift his head. But suddenly the heaving shoulders were still—she saw his hands clench themselves in incredulous tension. She stumbled towards him, holding to the table in her weakness. “Chris—Chris—I've come back——”

He lifted his head now and she saw that the madness, the sullen, sneering bitterness had gone. As death wipes out all trace of evil so his face had been swept clear. And they

looked at one another as though they saw each other for the first time after many years.

"I am not fit to live," he said quietly—"not fit to live——"

"How you have suffered, Chris——"

His eyes searched hers with a simple wonder.

"How do you know——?"

"A door opened," she murmured, almost to herself, "and I saw through——"

"I can tell you now——"

"Because I know. They tortured you, Chris."

"That was nothing. It is what they made of me——"

She had dropped down in the chair opposite him and he looked across at her, and she saw what had lain hidden behind his eyes. It was as though he threw down his last defence before her. "It is terrible to become a murderer and a coward," he said.

"They tortured you," she repeated out of her pain.

Suddenly he began to speak with a new eagerness—with the same tragic simplicity.

"I could not live without you," he said. "I had nothing left but the things you did for me—your touch—the sound of your voice—your step. However much I seemed to reject them, they were the things I dreamed of—clung to as to my last little shred of decency—of humanity. And when I knew that they were going too—that I should never hear them or see them again—my brain snapped. I went mad. I am not mad any more——"

She stretched out her hands towards him.

"How you suffered, Chris!"

He did not seem to see her gesture. He drew himself up a little.

"I want you to know one thing before you go," he said.

"You thought I was bitter and jealous because you had taken my job from me—you thought I took you away from it to satisfy my spite. I let you think so because it hurt me less. But it wasn't that. I—I used to be a sportsman, Jean—long ago—and you are the better man. I'd—I'd be proud to follow you—to give place to you—to watch you climb. It was because I loved you—because I had held you so long between me and madness—out there in the desert—that I could not let you go. And when you looked at me that first night I knew that I had lost you—that it was all dead in you—that I was only something terrible and hideous that had come into your life. You were sorry. You tried to hide it from me. But I knew. And I could not tell you what was in my heart for fear of your pity——"

Her eyes widened with remembrance.

"I know."

"And I hated him," he went on humbly, "because he was all that I had been and because I knew that you loved him and were going to him. And I could not bear it. Perhaps years ago I could have been brave and generous—but they—they crippled me out there—and I could not—even my love was a poor, distorted thing——"

"There was never any love between John and me," she answered, "only our work. And I have come back."

"I tried to tell you often," he said, "but I knew that you would not understand. You would not remember. To you it would have been as though a wretched, loathsome beggar had come whining to you for your love. I could see the disgust in your eyes—and that silenced me. Now it is all different. It is finished between us. You will not be offended at my telling you—perhaps you will be glad. Even if you were not going—even if I could keep you—I give you free——"

There was a faint, mysterious smile about her grey lips.

"I have come back, Chris," she repeated.

The sound of the rising water had grown louder. The advance guard had broken through. It muttered at its work beneath their feet. And suddenly the man heard——

"What is it——?" he whispered.

"The flood!" she answered with subdued triumph.

"And you——?"

"I was in the boat. I rowed back——"

For the first time his eyes rested on the dark spreading stain upon her dress.

"Oh, God—I hurt you——"

She shook her head doggedly—proudly.

"It is nothing—it is only a little wound. I thought at first I might save us both—but I am not strong any more——"

"You came back!" he cried out. "You knew that I was helpless—that I could save neither of us—that I must sit here—and wait—What have you done?"

"Some people seek understanding all their lives, Chris," she said dreamily—"and find it in a minute—sometimes in the last minute of all——" Suddenly she slipped to her knees, leaning against him—"as I have done."

"Why did you come back?" he repeated.

She did not answer. But she lifted his hands slowly, one by one, and kissed them. Before the night closed on her a second time she looked up at him. It seemed to her that in that moment, weakness and suffering dropped from him like a husk—that he grew young and splendid again before her eyes.

He sat with his arm about her, listening. He heard the pitiful creaking of the old floors—the deeper murderous rush of the river. His head was thrown back in an attitude

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of tense expectancy. The sweat of effort was about his mouth. He was very still as Samson may have been still before the great resurrection of his manhood.

Then suddenly he stood up.

He stood up and gathering the woman in his arms carried her to the door.

VI

"TINKER—TAILOR——"

"Tinker—tailor——" She stopped short with the laugh of some one who has stumbled over a little joke and threw a glance at her companion on the other side of the table. He laughed back, and she continued to count her cherry stones solemnly: "Tinker—tailor—soldier—sailor—beggarman—thief—tinker—tailor—soldier——". The cherry stones ran out. She counted them again, but they remained obstinately the same number, and she shook her head at them. "There, now— isn't that stupid? Only one wrong. If there'd been one less it would have been like a good omen, wouldn't it, Alf?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Don't believe much in that sort of thing myself. A bit 'eathenish, I think. Why, you can see there isn't nothing in it. Soldier! Now, would you marry a soldier, Jenny—one of these sleek-'aired lamp-posts in clothes so tight they couldn't 'it a fly without bust-in' theirselves? No, you wouldn't be seen doing it. No respectable girl would. And besides"—he insinuated his foot surreptitiously and tenderly against hers—"there's little me in the way, isn't there?"

She pushed the cherry stones disconsolately about her plate. She had a way of holding her spoon—the little finger genteelly extended—which always made him feel how unworthy he was of her. He withdrew his foot shamefacedly.

"P'raps if I hadn't taken that second lot it would have

been all right,” she lamented. “It was you who made me have them. I didn’t want them. And now—I can’t help it—I feel all unsettled. It’s no good making fun of these things, Alf. There was my Aunt Sarah—very careful she was—but one day she walked under a ladder, and three days later she was took ill. She knew what it was. ‘My dear,’ she said, ‘it’s all over with me,’ and just folded her hands and died. The doctor said—Alf, if you’re laughing——”

“I’m not laughing.” He moved his plate on one side to make room for his elbows, and his small, Cockney face flushed with earnestness. He brought all his masculine logic to bear upon her. “Look ’ere, Jenny, we’ll get this straight. You’re going to marry me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m not a soldier, am I?”

“No.”

“Well, there you are, then! What’s there to make a fuss about.”

“I’m not making a fuss.”

“I wouldn’t be a soldier—not if I was paid ten quid a week for it,” he went on. “I tell you what, Jenny—you won’t have to be ashamed of me one of these days. I’m an artist—yes, I am—a sort of artist; any man wot’s got ’is ’eart in ’is job like I ’ave is an artist. And sometimes, Jenny, sometimes I feel sort of—sort of inspired. Yes, I do. I get an idea—I see something in my mind’s eye—and I just puts my scissors to the cloth and cuts out something that you couldn’t better in Conduit Street,—without measuring—hardly knowing what I’m doing. That’s an artist all over, Jenny. And old Solomon knows—oh, he knows all right. ’E’s got ’is eye on me. If I threatened to leave ’e’d double my salary. But I’m not going to leave.

I'm going to stick to the old firm and put life into it. One of these days it'll be 'Solomon and Tinker, Bond Street,' you see."

She looked at him doubtfully from under her long charcoaled eyelashes.

"How you do talk, Alf!"

"It isn't talk, Jenny. Shall I tell you who came into the shop the other day? A grumpy old chap 'e was, but smart—my word—with a figure—well, there's many a Piccadilly knut 'ud envy him. I made a morning suit for him—the best thing I ever did; not a crease, one fitting—and he was as pleased as a baby with a new rattle. Do you know who 'e was? Lord Alvingstone. Give you my word. Do you know what it means? That every swell in town will be buzzing round our shop before the month's out. You'll see!"

She smiled; the cloud lifted a little. A waitress swept away the plate with the offending cherry stones.

"Sounds all right, Alf!"

"Of course it's all right, dear. One of these days it'll be Mrs. Alfred Tinker, The Lodge, Hampstead."

"Kensington, Alf. Kensington's classier than Hampstead."

"All right—Kensington, then."

"D'you think—really——?"

"Certain. And a run-about of our own—and—and—any other things—theatres—dress circle—and jolly little suppers afterwards—not in messy places like this—p'raps the Troc. and all that."

"Oh, Alf."

He smiled rather unsteadily. What with many lights and the many people and the string band sighing romantically through the buzz and clatter, he felt so happy that the tears rose and burnt the rims of his pale blue eyes.

“Better than Mrs. Sergeant-major, eh?”

They laughed together. He forgot the change which the waitress slapped down disrespectfully at his elbow. And all the way home Jenny Adams let him hold her hand.

II

He remembered that evening five months afterwards. He remembered the very table they had sat at and the number of stains on the tablecloth. As to the cherry stones, the mere thought of them sent an uncanny thrill through his nerves. Without having made Shakespeare's acquaintance, young Alfred Tinker agreed with him that there were more things in heaven and earth than an ordinary fellow could make head or tail of, and the cherry-stone episode was one of them. Because that very afternoon Jenny Adams had said to him quite plainly:

“The fact is I've got to marry a soldier, Alf. I don't like being seen walking about with a civvy. It isn't respectable. It makes me ashamed, and my friends talk. You'd better think it over.”

He was thinking it over now. He sat at his cutting-table under the green-shaded light and snapped unhappily at the air with his enormous scissors. The beautiful pair of khaki slacks that lay before him, awaiting the master-hand, seemed to him to express symbolically the opposing duties which tore his soul in twain. He had had no idea that, outside a penny novelette, mere moral issues could make anyone so entirely wretched.

“It's a case of art against 'cart,” he thought, with awful humour.

His five assistants threw him occasional, respectful glances. To them this little fellow, with his shock of fair hair, feverish little face, and fiery, mystic eyes, was as a god. An inspired

god—a poet—a being into whom the immortals had sent a breath of genius. They had seen him perform sartorial feats which they knew to be unrivalled in the history of their race. They were proud to breathe the same air with him. They boasted of him. They had only to say, "Tinker, of Solomon's," and people looked at them with a new interest. His fidelity to the musty old firm, in the face of unprecedented offers of bribery, filled them with respect and astonishment.

"Brooding over something new," Mr. Simpson whispered tensely to his neighbour. "You'll see, I know the look."

They subsided into reverential silence, and there was no sound but the snip of scissors and the subdued whirr of a sewing-machine from the despised women's quarters. Then quite suddenly and almost violently Alf. Tinker flung himself off his high stool, and without even waiting to put on his coat, opened the glass door which led into the chief's office and disappeared.

"Well, he can do that sort of thing," Mr. Simpson remarked, sighing. "We'll never bang into the boss's lair without knocking—not in this life."

"His sort's always impetuous," his neighbour added knowingly. "Can't expect 'em to behave like ordinary human beings. 'Cause they aren't ordinary. If a man tries to curb his nature——" He broke off with a start. "Good gracious—what was that?"

They stared at each other. The sound had been explosive—agonised—was followed by a low yet passionate outburst, in which they recognised the Hebraic accents of Mr. Samuel Solomon. Once Alfred Tinker's clearer voice intervened, but it was swept away like a straw on a flood.

"It's come at last," said Mr. Simpson significantly. "He's going. And what can you expect? I know for a fact

that Feversham offered him a cool thousand just to start with. A man can't afford to sneeze at that sort of thing.”

“Poor old Solomon—he's taking it hard.”

He was taking it very hard indeed. He was crying. And Alfred Tinker cried with him. He was terribly over-wrought on his own account, and the sight of this stout, bald-headed little man, with the bowed shoulders of one on whom Fortune has never smiled, shaking with sobs, completed his distress. He rubbed the tears off his cheek with his cuff and sniffed shamelessly.

“Now, Mr. Solomon—don't—don't you take it like that—I can't bear it. You know I wouldn't go—not for any money in the world; but this is different. You know how it is, Mr. Solomon, I'm a young chap—and—and—dash it—if the country needs you——”

Mr. Solomon lifted his face out of his hands. In spite of its elderly fatness, it was a rather child-like, pathetic face, and the smear of grief was not altogether comic.

“And doesn't your country need you—here?” he quavered shrilly. “Think, Tinker, think! Do you want our fine young men to face the Germans with their breeches cut by that poor doddering Simpson? Don't you realise how it takes the heart out of the bravest to know that his tunic rucks at the back? Haven't you ever heard of the wonderful courage and confidence of a man in a perfect fit? Tinker, do you know what Captain Hodge said to me only this morning? ‘Solomon, old bean,’ he said, ‘there's many a German 'll rue the day when I go over the top in these jolly old togs.’ Those were his very words, Tinker. And could he have got those jolly old togs anywhere else? No, you know he couldn't. Nowhere. And do I overcharge? Do I profiteer? You know I don't. I make it possible for the poorest hero to face the enemy in the habiliments

of a gentleman. Isn't that patriotic work, Tinker? And aren't you my partner? Yes, Tinker, I said my partner—in spirit and in fact, Tinker. And what more can I say?"

Alfred drew himself up gravely.

"You didn't need to say so much, Mr. Solomon," he said. "I'm not after partnerships—not now anyway. I want to do what's right. It's not easy to sit safe and cosy cutting out clothes for other chaps to fight in, and I don't like it—I don't like the feel of it."

Mr. Solomon appeared not to hear. He seemed to be immersed in a slough of hopeless meditation.

"It's hard, Tinker—very hard. All my life I've been fighting for the old business—trying to make it go, trying to make a decent living out of it—and everything's gone wrong—everything's been against me. Sometimes when I've thought of the future—of my poor wife and children and of their future when I'm gone—I've felt as though it were all too much for me. And now when a gleam of light breaks—when the right sort of customer comes along—you leave me—you leave me in the lurch, Tinker."

"No, sir, I don't—I wouldn't. Alfred choked in his emotion. "You know I wouldn't, not if I could help it; but my girl, Miss Adams, said——"

Mr. Solomon pounced on him like a terrier on a rat.

"A woman! Aha, a woman! Didn't I know a woman was at the bottom of it? You—you, a grown man, you allow yourself to be hoodwinked by a vain, flighty creature like that? Don't you know what the Bible says about women? Have you not read of Samson and Delilah? From the days of Adam woman has been man's undoing, and now you, Tinker—you——" He clenched his podgy hands and brought them down with a challenging bang on the table. "My son, look yourself in the face; ask yourself,

is it patriotism or is it the bright eye of a woman that persuaded you to forsake your post in this hour of crisis? I know that you are an honest boy. If you can answer me truthfully that it is pure patriotism—why, then, I will be silent; I will say no more; I will watch the foundering of my last hope in resignation. Think and answer.”

Alfred found it difficult even to think. As to answering truthfully, it appeared that truth was not the simple, straightforward business that the Sunday School would have us imagine. “What is truth?” Alfred questioned in his own language. Was patriotism or Jenny Adams at the bottom of his resolution? Did he want to set forth to satisfy his conscience or Jenny Adams’s predilection for khaki? What was the nation’s most pressing need—a great tailor or a small fighter?

“Think!” repeated Mr. Solomon even more dramatically.

Alfred thought. Perspiration gathered beneath the shock of disordered hair. He pressed his fists down on Mr. Solomon’s table as though he were trying to squeeze something out of it.

“I—I’d like to ‘ave a go at them blighters myself,” he answered quite unexpectedly.

Mr. Solomon flapped his short arms like a wounded penguin.

“So it is to please yourself you go? You leave your post of national duty—you leave the poor old firm to ruin, to please—not even a woman—but your own vanity—a paltry love of excitement—a primitive lust for slaughter? Isn’t that so? Answer me.”

“No, no; it isn’t—I mean—I don’t want to really—I’d hate it—only—oh, Lord!”

For Mr. Solomon had begun to cry again.

Now Alfred, like all true artists, was a man of feeling.

Mr. Solomon's eloquence had shaken him. He went under completely in Mr. Solomon's tears. "I want to do what's right," he stammered hoarsely. "Look here, Mr. Solomon, I put it to you—what would you do in my place? I've confidence in you, Mr. Solomon. You've always dealt straight with me. I'll take your word. What would you do? You tell me that, and I'll do it."

Mr. Solomon became calm and judicial.

"Do?" he said. "I would wait. When my country pointed at me and said clearly, 'Samuel Solomon, we need your sword more than your scissors,' then I would go. Not before. My duty would be quite clear to me."

"Give you my word!" said Alfred Tinker between his teeth.

He offered a trembling hand, but Mr. Solomon rose up passionately and kissed him. He was almost as pathetic in his joy as he had been in his sorrow, and Alfred bore with him patiently. But when he went back to his work-table the five assistants gazed at their hero with anxious astonishment. He did not look like a man who had wrung a partnership or a thousand-pound bonus out of a desperate employer. He looked dejected—almost broken. And the khaki slacks that took shape in that hour were never reckoned among the master's great efforts. They lacked the inimitable touch. They were, as Mr. Simpson admirably phrased it, perfect, but uninspired.

III

That night, at the corner of Oxford Circus, Jenny Adams decided briefly, but firmly, "that it wouldn't do," and that "it wasn't good enough". Her manner was distrait, and it was quite evident even to Alfred's blurred and aching perceptions that she had an appointment elsewhere. He was

thankful for her indifference and the darkness which hid something of his abject misery.

"If you'd only wait a bit, Jenny," he pleaded, but without hope. "After all, it isn't always easy to do the right thing."

"Not for some chaps," she admitted scathingly. "But it's got to be for the chap I marry."

As a perfect lady she returned the engagement ring, to which she had tied, very neatly, a white feather.

After that night Alfred Tinker was a changed man. He worked feverishly, brilliantly. The fame of him reached the Marines and reverberated through the Guards' mess. From the dismal little shop in the City the firm migrated into Bond Street, and the gilded vestibule scintillated with everything naval and military from a snotty to a brass-hat. The staff took on twenty fresh workers, and in spite of increasing bulk Mr. Solomon gave the impression of one who keeps his feet on earth only by a conscious effort. But from Alfred Tinker the joy of life seemed to have departed utterly. He had been a gay little fellow—a good pal—up to any harmless lark; always ready with a helping hand or a good word. He became morose, brooding, unsociable. He came to the workroom with his pockets stuffed with morning papers, which he read passionately through the lunch hour. Anyone who interrupted him suffered terrifying results. When the war news was bad or some fresh atrocity had been committed his twenty-five assistants avoided him as they would have avoided an irritable tiger.

"Why——" he burst out once in a gust of too long suppressed fury, "why, in Heaven's name, if they want men don't they fetch 'em? All this damn shilly-shallying! Why don't they get on with things—rake us all in? What the blazes are they waiting for? There's some blasted

Germans behind all this mucking about, I know. Ought to call up every man in the country—they ought——”

Mr. Simpson, though slightly shocked at the display of language, was nervously conciliatory.

“Well—it’s a good thing for Solomon & Co. that they don’t,” he said. “Supposing they got you, Mr. Tinker?”

Alfred Tinker glared at him in awful silence.

About a month later a change came. His unapproachableness remained, but it had lost its ferocity. He went about his work like a man whose eyes are fixed on some distant vision. He did not answer when he was spoken to, simply because he did not hear, and a faint, persistent smile lit up his small, pugnacious features. He pored over the Parliamentary reports as a lover pores over the letters of his beloved.

On the night that the Conscription Bill passed its third reading the crisis came. Alfred Tinker went out and spent the night in a police-cell—gloriously speechlessly drunk.

IV

It was a rather curious roomful. The occupants had arrived in pairs, and they sat in pairs, close together like grotesque love-birds. Each pair was made up of an old man and a young man. The old men wore a look of grim responsibility, and the young men were nervous and self-conscious. They seemed to find a great difficulty in keeping still, and every time the door opened and a policeman peered through, searching for his quarry, they jerked from their seats as though someone had run a pin into them. Whenever a pair returned from their visit to the inner sanctuary their bearing was intently scrutinised. Cheerfulness evidently aroused sullen dislike, depression, a rather ma-

licious sympathy. As the day wore on sandwiches and converted medicine bottles were produced from bulging side-pockets, but were not successful in relieving the general tension and rapidly increasing gloom.

One pair, however, differed markedly from the rest. For one thing, their attitude towards one another was peculiar. When they spoke at all it was with a gravity tinged with dejection. But most of the time they were silent, and their expressions were then extraordinarily elate. They were like two mourners at the funeral of a wealthy unloved relative, who were constantly endeavouring to impress each other with their disinterested grief. The old man was stout, Hebraic, and wonderfully attired; his charge, whose upturned nose denied kinship, was small and wiry, with intense blue eyes and a sensitive mouth that from time to time quivered spasmodically, either with distrust or an incipient grin—it was hard to tell which. When the policeman demanded the forthcoming of one “Alfred Tinker,” however, he rose briskly in answer to the summons, and his companion brought up a portentous rear.

“Seems mighty sure of himself!”

“Another bloomin’ indispensable!”

“Call it fair play! I don’t think!”

But the door slammed and the mutterers subsided again into indignant silence.

The adjoining room was furnished meagrely with a long table, accommodating three elderly gentlemen, and a small desk, placed a little to one side, which supported the elbows of an aloof, obviously disapproving onlooker in khaki. Alfred Tinker occupied the centre of the stage. Mr Samuel Solomon, top-hat in hand, stood at his elbow rather in an attitude of a best man at the altar, and to carry the simile further Alfred Tinker himself made a very representative

bridegroom. He was elate, nervous, fidgety, and absent-minded. He answered questions as to his name and occupation with some difficulty, as though they were matters on which he could not be expected to possess any certain information. But on the whole his bearing was resigned and manly, and the khaki individual noted him with some approval.

"Graded A1?"

"Yes, sir."

"Claiming total exemption?"

"No, sir—I don't—at least——"

"I do," said Mr. Solomon, "for my partner."

The khaki individual sneered openly.

"On what grounds?"

"As being indispensable to my business."

"And your business?"

"I consider indispensable to the well-being of His Majesty's Forces."

Everyone laughed. Mr. Solomon himself smiled, but it was the subtle smile of one who alone knows the true inwardness of his joke. Alfred Tinker looked at the military representative. He wanted badly to wink at him—to encourage him to extreme ruthlessness, and was rather daunted to observe that that individual's expression had undergone a sudden change. He frowned. He tapped his forehead with his penholder in the evident endeavour to remember. These symptoms Alfred Tinker noted with an unreasoning sinking of the heart, and from that moment his bearing lost its jauntiness.

"And what is your business?" the military gentleman demanded abruptly. "What's your name?"

"Solomon—Samuel Solomon," said Mr. Solomon, bowing to him.

"Samuel Solomon," murmured his questioner in the accents of dawning recollection.

"Of Bond Street," Mr. Solomon added softly.

"Then"—the pen-holder indicated Alfred—"this is the Tinker?"

"The Tinker," Mr. Solomon agreed, with the complacent gravity of one who, on invitation, lays a grand slam hand on the table. "The Tinker, as you say, sir."

"Well—then—of course."

The military individual left his position at the desk. He went and sat down by the three elderly gentlemen, and addressed them in an undertone. He made little movements with his hands, as though his feelings had got the better of his natural stoicism, and the three elderly gentlemen looked at Alfred Tinker intently and almost respectfully. Their quite obvious intention to give short shrift to a flagrant young shirker had vanished. They nodded rhythmically to the military representative's earnest ejaculations, amongst which the listeners caught: "Perfect cut—inimitable—I assure you—at half a day's notice—no fitting—had it from the fellow himself—breeches—nothing like them in England—no profiteering—a national institution, by Jove!"

"Exactly—exactly," murmured one of the elderly gentlemen.

Mr. Solomon stared into the crown of his top-hat with an expression of almost superhuman detachment.

"Look here now," Alfred Tinker began passionately.

The chairman smiled at him.

"As the military representative himself recommends your exemption," he said, "we shall of course, raise no objection, and you will be——"

"If you know wot I'd gone through with this damn business," Alfred Tinker interrupted violently, "worrying

and fussing, eating my 'eart out over the 'ole thing, dyin' to 'ave a go on my own and be able to look the girls—the other chaps—in the face—and now when I think my time's come at last——”

“The fact is,” said Mr. Solomon, interposing himself with unexpected grace, “my partner's position is a very painful one. He is a patriot and he has a conscience. From the beginning of the war he has wished to throw himself and, I may say, his art into the carnage. I confess I have endeavoured to restrain him. We old people have a duty to perform towards hot-headed youth, gentlemen, and I felt it my duty to point out that a man with a poor physique but an inimitable talent is of more use to his country in his workshop than in the trenches. Mr. Tinker had to admit the force of my argument and gave his word that he would hold back until his country called him directly. The decision is now in your hands, and I am sure my partner will abide by it. Won't you, Alfred?”

“Oh, damn!” said Alfred Tinker bitterly.

The chairman's expression was genuinely touched. He removed his glasses and wiped them with a silk handkerchief.

“Your impulse does you credit, Mr. Tinker,” he said; “at the same time we must none of us be swayed by mere sentimentality. It is our duty to see that each man is fixed in the place in which he can use his faculties to the utmost, and it is quite clear to me that for the present, at any rate, you are doing the most good where you are. We therefore grant you six months' exemption, at the end of which time you can appeal again——”

“But it may all be over by then!” Alfred Tinker protested hoarsely.

“Let us hope so,” The chairman indulged in a mild

facetiousness. "I'm afraid we shan't want to continue the war even to oblige you, Mr. Tinker."

Mr. Solomon took Alfred by the elbow.

"Come my dear fellow," he urged gently. "Come——"

Alfred Tinker came. His thick, fair hair stood on end as though he had been through some physical struggle. His eyes were red-rimmed and so desperately wretched that the remaining supplicants in the adjoining room had no doubt as to his fate.

"Got it full in the neck, he has!" they whispered.

"And serve him right too. A young upstanding fellow like him! Now there are cases of real 'ardship. Take a man like myself with a wife and child and a varicose vein."

Outside, Mr. Solomon had hailed a taxi. It was an unusual extravagance, but he felt that the occasion and Alfred Tinker's appearance warranted it. He had the tact to withhold congratulations, and even the twenty-five assistants welcomed their rescued hero in awed silence.

For two months Alfred Tinker stood it. Then on the day of the sinking of the "Lovena" he dramatically and completely vanished.

V

The Redmonthshires—otherwise known in the Service as the "Always-too-late-to-mends"—was not a distinguished regiment when Alfred Tinker joined it. In the present war it had not as yet seen active service, and its banners were innocent of battle honours. The only martial episode with which it had been connected was the suppression of an insignificant riot in a manufacturing district for which, however, it arrived several hours too late. At other more critical periods in the Empire's history the Redmonthshires were equally unfortunate. They were either ordered elsewhere

at the opening of hostilities or they arrived with the armistice, and their appearance came to be regarded as synonymous with peace. Probably, as a direct result of this reputation, it was an inexpensive regiment, with low messing bills and a relatively low standard in dress. It followed also that only determined, if impecunious, soldiers sought admission to its ranks, and that there was no body of men in the British Army more passionately athirst for glory. Their attitude towards all facetiousness was one of grim reticence touched with acerbity. They became fanatics with one thought, one hope, one purpose, and, like most fanatics, they were not popular.

It cannot be said that the advent of Alfred Tinker—alias Alfred Taylor at this period—added substantially to the Redmonthshires' chances of renown. He was smaller than any other man in the regiment, and for all the passionate goodwill which he put into his work it never roused his N.C.O. to anything but more or less tolerant disgust. An artist remained an artist. Alfred, in the midst of an intricate manoeuvre, would catch sight of his lieutenant's tunic, and in a minute all would be forgotten, but the craving to get at it and at least relieve its worst symptoms. The ensuing disaster to himself and his whole company worried but could not cure him. Only on route marches, with a will to endure and a mind free to wander, did he come out with flying colours.

And Alfred was happy. He had never been so happy in his life. An intolerable burden seemed to have been lifted from him. In times of deep disgrace, with the wrath of his sergeant breaking over him in veritable cascades, it was difficult to conceal his deep inner contentment. His light-heartedness became proverbial, and on peculiarly trying occasions was suspected as half-witted. When he walked

abroad he swaggered, and at night time he lay awake and dreamed dreams that had the advantage of being based on real possibilities. Sometimes it was a V.C., and sometimes, in the less giddy moments, a D.C.M. Sometimes he contented himself with a sergeant's stripes, but more often he had a commission and a uniform made with his own hands. Always he met Jenny Adams. A chance meeting, you understand. He saw her start, her look of amazement, followed, as her eye counted his decorations, by grief, pride, shame, and unavailing regret. Sometimes he passed on with a grave, unrecognising countenance. Or, because he had a faithful heart, he took her into the old familiar café, and at the self-same table told her the story of his exploits.

“Do you remember the cherry stones?” he would ask, with a sad playfulness.

And then she would cry, and he would squeeze her hand under the table and assure her that all was forgiven and forgotten.

At this point the dream ended. Alfred Tinker-Taylor came back to the necessary preliminaries, and his last thought was a most earnest prayer.

“Oh, God, give a fellow a chance! Make them blighters send us out soon——”

VI

The tragedy came, as tragedies often come, with a deceptively auspicious countenance. First as a wild rumour, and then as a glorious certainty, it became known to the rank and file of the Redmonthshires that they were destined for the front. A wave of excitement swept the regiment. At last the time had come for them to show the world what they were made of. Haunted by their unhappy past, they

scanned the newspaper for a suggestion that hostilities might cease before their arrival, and the very word "peace," even when uttered accidentally, reduced them to a state of blasphemous fury.

First there was to be an inspection. As a rule an inspection meant for the Redmonthshires a great deal of extra polishing, a tiresome afternoon spent in the broiling sun or the pouring rain (it was always one or the other), and some dug-out old general or a camouflaged civilian pacing up and down their lines trying to look eagle-eyed and intelligent. They had a poor opinion of inspection. But as a preliminary to greater things—as a sort of "send off"—it was to be endured, and a certain solemnity marked the final preparations. According to custom, Alfred Tinker was arranged carefully where his insignificant stature and mental aberrations were least likely to excite attention.

"And if you so much as blink an eyelid when the General passes," remarked Sergeant Nobbins unpleasantly, "I'll make you wish you'd never seen the light".

Alfred had no intention of blinking. If ever a man was filled with martial ardour, with the determination to bring glory upon his company and himself, that man was Alfred as the inspecting General, with Colonel MacHamish, bore down the line. And yet a moment later—suddenly, incredibly—he bent down. Deliberately, fastidiously, he brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his immaculate boots. A roar like that of a goaded bull came from somewhere in the near distance, and he stood up again, not erect, however, but with bowed head like a man plunged in profound reflection.

There are some events which pass beyond the range of language, and even of human emotion. For this reason

possibly Sergeant Nobbins was almost gentle with Alfred as he escorted him to the Colonel's quarters.

"I don't know what he'll do to you," he reflected. "They put a man up against a wall for almost anything these days, and I'm sorry for you—though maybe it'll be all for the best in the end." He looked at Alfred's haggard face attentively. "Something on your conscience, eh?" he jerked out.

"Yes," said Alfred.

"Hiding from justice?" pursued the sergeant triumphantly.

"Something like it."

"Murder?"

"Oh, worse—worse!" Alfred answered with passionate bitterness.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Sergeant Nobbins respectfully.

Colonel MacHamish and his Adjutant received Alfred. They had evidently been in close discussion, and their manner in dismissing Sergeant Nobbins convinced that personage that the matter in hand was of international importance. Alfred remained alone to face his judges. He looked hunted and stubborn, and piteous, like a small animal in a large trap.

"To begin with," said Colonel MacHamish, referring to a charge sheet, "your name is not Taylor."

"I enlisted as A. Taylor," Alfred stated in a high, anxious voice. "I am A. Taylor and if anyone says I'm not——"

"That will do. 'A. Taylor, a tailor.' Very pretty!" Colonel MacHamish nodded at the Adjutant, who relaxed his usual air of aloof dignity and laughed quite boyishly. "No evasions now; your real name, please, and no nonsense." The Colonel's voice was severe, his expression almost playful. Alfred lost all self-control.

"I shan't," he said. "I don't see whose business it is

who I am. I haven't done anything to anyone. I've got as much right as anyone else to be a soldier; it's not fair."

"You're asking for court-martial, my man," the Adjutant interrupted coldly.

"I don't care. Then p'raps I'd get justice."

"Besides you're recognised," Colonel MacHamish remarked. "Lord Alvingstone recognised you."

Alfred made a noise like a choked sob.

"I knew he would; it was that damned morning suit. He said he'd never forget it."

"Your real name is Alfred Tinker?"

"Yes, it is, and I don't see——"

"The Tinker?"

"Yes," said Alfred brokenly.

Colonel MacHamish paced thoughtfully backwards and forwards. Suddenly he stopped short and looked over his shoulder like a man trying to inspect the small of his back.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

Alfred Tinker's glazed eyes followed the Colonel's gaze, and brightened with contempt and a dawning eagerness.

"Awful," he said; "the left sleeve's put in wrong."

"I knew it," said Colonel MacHamish. "I felt it. Could anything be done?"

"If I were alone with that tunic for half an hour," Alfred Tinker began, and then dropped into a stricken silence.

Colonel MacHamish resumed his pacing.

"Yesterday you disgraced the regiment, Tinker," he said. "You realise that, don't you?"

The easy tears were in Alfred's eyes.

"Yes, sir—I do—only——"

"And you'd do anything in your power to make reparation?"

"Yes, sir," said Alfred sadly and hopelessly.

“It lies in your power. The fact is, Tinker, you’re a poor soldier. You always will be a poor soldier. I don’t see that you have a single soldierly quality. Yet your enlistment under an assumed name proves that your intentions are most creditable. And your cut, of course, is world-famous. Now, Tinker, the regiment you have joined is—is going to be one of the famous regiments of the war—it ought to go out equipped in a way worthy of its—ah—its future. Unfortunately—I speak to you, Tinker, as one man to another—we are not a wealthy regiment. Our officers cannot afford to procure themselves uniforms from the best men. You have no doubt observed the result. Beside Guardsmen we cut a poor figure. This is not as it should be. It lies with you, Tinker, whether things remain as they are or whether the Redmonthshires become the smartest, as well as the finest, regiment in the British Army. You see my meaning?”

“Yes, sir,” said Alfred tonelessly.

“In fact,” said the Colonel with a triumphant and solemn gesture, “I have determined to detail you for special service. I create a post for you. From henceforward you will serve your country as regimental tailor.”

In an incredibly short space of time the news spread to wherever the British Army upheld the glory of the Empire. The Guards heard it and looked askance. Line regiments gnashed their teeth. Mr. Samuel Solomon put his head down on a roll of valuable cloth and wept.

And Alfred Tinker stood at the window of his commodious workroom where his five assistants toiled day and night for the splendour of the Redmonthshires, and watched the regiment swing out grandly through the barrack gates. He listened to the call of the bugles and the martial thunder of the band as it played the tired men home. He felt in

his very blood the stir and thrill of the great hour for which eight hundred men had lived and worked and prayed.

But what was in Alfred Tinker's heart must not be told. It was too sad.

VII

She stood, arms akimbo, and watched him. He did not know that he was being watched, and his depression was unconsciously and pathetically conspicuous. It isolated him from his fellows. He sat hunched up in the corner, and the bowl of soup that steamed up into his face might have been a witch's cauldron in which a most unpleasant future had been brewed for him. But he was a nice-looking fellow, she considered, and anyhow life's no joke for anyone.

"Well," she said finally, "what's the matter? Thinking about the Ritz? Isn't it good enough for you?"

He jumped up violently and went red to the roots of his fair hair.

"Oh—no—it's fine——"

"Well, then—why don't you eat it up? Don't like to see good food wasted. Besides, I cooked it, you know. Not very polite of you."

He glanced up at her anxiously, and then, seeing that she was not really offended at all, he smiled and began to rattle his spoon with conciliatory energy.

"It's first class. I'm just off my feed, that's all."

"But you've marched fifteen miles since your last meal. The boys told me so."

"I didn't. Came in a transport wagon."

"Sick?" she asked.

"Sick of things," he muttered.

"Oh, well," she said. "Cheer up!"

She bustled off with a trayload of dirty plates that might have staggered a coalheaver and presently bustled back with more plates and steaming bowls, which she set out before the new arrivals with skill and much kindly facetiousness. At first the Redmonthshires looked at her silently and wistfully, like tired children. They did not seem quite to understand how she came to be there. They had worked their way through such a slough of misery that a woman at the end of it all—and an English-woman to boot, rosy-cheeked, clear-eyed, frank-hearted—seemed as paradoxical and incredible as an angel in hell. More than warmth and food, she re-lit the courage in them. They began to forget themselves. In a dim, speechless way they were as proud of her as though she had belonged to them.

“Got pluck, that girl,” said Sergeant Nobbins concisely. “Any ’uman being that sticks it out ’ere must ’ave pluck. Come on; let’s ’ave a song, boys, just to show ’er we ain’t down-’earted neither.”

So after fifteen miles of ankle-deep mud they sang. The wooden shanty rang with their voices, and the much-tried piano tinkled a cracked but cheerful accompaniment.

But the little fellow with the fair hair continued to stare into his bowl of soup. And as distress attracts a woman as honey attracts a bee, it was not surprising that the rosy-cheeked girl in the khaki overall came back to the attack. In the first place, she took his ice-cold soup from him firmly but not unkindly.

“It’s no use clinging to things you don’t want,” she said. “But you can’t go on like this, you know. What’s the tragedy anyhow? Anything anyone can help about? You can talk to me if you like. I shan’t laugh.”

“Laugh?” he said drearily. “Laugh?”

"Oh, well—you know, men are that queer. Sentimental as any girl. Only they 'aven't the pluck to show it. What I mean is—if your worrying about your mammy—or—or anyone, you can pour it all out and I shall understand—seems it's part of my job here."

"What is your job?" he asked gloomily.

"Looking after your fellows. I'm a W.A.A.C. Never heard of them in your village, I suppose. Look at my uniform."

He looked.

"Wants taking in on the shoulders," he commented

She laughed.

"Fancy your seeing that; yes, it does. Only I haven't time. What's 'er name?"

"What's 'oose name?"

"Oh, you know, you're worrying about 'er now—your girl."

"I 'aven't got a girl."

"Well, it's your mammy, then."

"I 'aven't got a mammy."

"Oh!" she said. She became grave and sympathetic.

"Must be rotten being all alone like that."

"There's worse things than being alone," he muttered.

"Yes; I know, I've 'eard the other chaps talk about it—before they go up. When they come back they're different—quite cockahoop. You see, they've found out they aren't 'alf as afraid as they thought they were."

The little man gave a sudden hoot of satiric laughter.

"So you think I'm afraid, eh?"

"Well, I don't know, of course. Lots are, and no shame to 'em; it don't mean anything. There was a chap 'ere six months ago who cried on my shoulder like a baby the day before they went up. Got the V.C., 'e did."

"Oh, damn him!" said the depressed young man with increased bitterness.

She shook her head disapprovingly.

"That's rude. Besides, I knows myself what it feels like. I used to think if ever I 'eard a bomb go off I'd faint right away, but I d.dn't, and I don't take no more notice of bombs than if they were tyres bursting. And we've been shelled too, often enough."

"Shelled?" he echoed alertly. "Wot—'ere?"

"I should say so. Only five miles be'ind the line, we are. But, of course, it's nothing to the real thing——"

He relapsed dismally.

"S'ppose not."

"And, any'ow, you oughtn't to grouse," she went on. "It ain't fair. It's a sort of going back on your pals——"

"I 'aven't got no pals." He turned his head away so that she should not see his face. "Sometimes I feel as though I was the only 'uman being in the whole bloomin' world," he said huskily.

She knew then that he had a secret sorrow, she had read about secret sorrows—mostly in the upper circles of society, but she had never hoped to meet one. Her heart went out to the mysteriously unhappy soldier. But she was not of a weak, sloppy nature. She gave him a firm, consoling pat on the shoulder.

"Well, as long as you're 'ere you can count on Cissie Edwards," she said cheerfully. "And when you're not here—as you haven't got no one—you can write to me if you like. I'm no great shakes at letter writing, but if it'll buck you up a bit——"

"Why—you don't know who I am—or—what I am!" he said incredulously.

"Yes—I do," she said. "You're lonely—and you're a

soldier fightin' for old England—and—and any'ow I likes the look of you——”

Thereat unexpectedly she blushed.

Now Jenny Adams had never blushed. Her make-up, both spiritual and material, did not allow for such an expression of feeling. And a broken, unromantic, yet very illuminating thought came to Alfred Tinker.

“Now if this girl was to wash 'er face she'd be rosier than ever—but if Jenny washed 'ers—if she ever did——”

He was chivalrous enough to leave it at that. But from that moment the ghost of Jenny Adams may be said to have faded out of Alfred Tinker's life for ever.

VIII

The Redmonthshires rested three days before they were sent forward for the consummation of their passionate hopes. All the time that he could spare from his extemporary tailoring department in the Mairie, Alfred Tinker spent in the canteen. He resented with increasing bitterness the repairs and alterations which each officer seemed to consider a “necessary enemy”. He became more than ever morose, and absent-minded. A roll of khaki corduroy, which had been specially ordered from England, was ruined in a fit of depression, and the Adjutant shook his head prophetically.

“If we don't take care,” he said, “he'll break out——”

“And if he does,” said the Colonel, who was in no temper to stand nonsense from anyone, “I'll have him shot”.

The saying was judiciously brought to Alfred Tinker's notice and did little to increase his cheerfulness.

He spent his money on food he never ate. He would sit for an hour over a meat-pie, apparently purposeless, in

reality waiting for the moment when Cissie Edwards would come his way. Or he would lean against the canteen counter, sipping an interminable cup of cocoa, watching her. And, though Cissie Edwards had never time for more than a nod and a smile, she knew. Moreover, Alfred knew that she knew. Between them there was, in fact, that most wonderful understanding which goes by the name of love-at-first-sight. Only it was overshadowed by the secret sorrow, and between the two of them, Alfred seemed to grow smaller and more intense and feverish-looking with every hour.

The last night came. The Redmonthshires who were to move out at midnight, enjoyed their last rest in dry billets, and the canteen was in half-darkness and very quiet so that the dull, monotonous gunfire which one forgot in the usual bustle and clatter struck the consciousness with a new and sinister force.

Alfred found Cissie Edwards at the counter counting prune stones and crying.

"Tinker—tailor—soldier—sailor——"

He put his hand over hers.

"Oh, please, don't!" he said.

They looked at each other. They were both very white and unhappy-eyed. If there were other people in the world at that moment they did not know it. Alfred found that he could not remove his hand.

"It's a silly game," said Cissie Edwards hoarsely. "I don't know why I did it."

Alfred shook his head.

"It's not silly. It comes true sometimes. I couldn't bear it—if it didn't come wot I wanted."

"It makes 'soldier'," she said faintly.

But he did not answer. To her amazement she realised

that he was trembling as though she had struck him, and her warm heart went out to him in deep pity and infinite misunderstanding.

"Mr. Tinker, don't take it like that," she said. "You'll come through; you'll come through; I'm sure you will."

"Oh, I'll come through," he muttered. "No fear of that." His grip on her hand tightened till it hurt, but she did not protest. "I made up my mind I wouldn't say nothing," he jerked out painfully, "and I won't, I won't. I 'aven't the right. If you knew wot I was you wouldn't look at me again. If you knew what I'd been doing all this time you'd 'ate the sight of me. I know you would; you couldn't 'elp yourself."

"I wouldn't," she said firmly and with much dignity. "I don't care wot you are or wot you've done. I know you're risking your life like a brave man, and anything you've done you shouldn't do, you'll make right when you get your chance. I know that."

"Oh, Gawd!" he groaned. Then, suddenly, he stood very straight. "Miss Edwards," he said, "either I wipes out my past or you don't see me again. If—if—I don't come back—you'll understand—I tried—won't you? And you'll know why—and not think hard things of a fellow. I've been a poor sort of skunk; I know that better than anyone—but I'll make good now—and if the Colonel himself tries to take my chance away from me I'll brain him. See?"

She saw very imperfectly, but she nodded, and her eyes were blind with tears.

And Alfred Tinker kissed her toil-roughened hand like a gallant knight of old and fled.

IX

Alfred Tinker had just completed his arrangements when the Adjutant, in full war-kit, with a brown paper parcel under his arm, banged into the tailoring department at the Mairie. He was preoccupied, and beyond the fact that a light burned unusually late over the work-table and that someone stood in the shadow in apparent idleness, the circumstances at first made no particular impression on him.

“The riding breeches,” he explained briefly “New leathers. Better be getting on with them. A nice quiet job for you, Tinker. And, look here, there’s this blessed tunic that Peters made for me. I don’t know whether you can do anything to it. Have a try anyhow; there’s a good fellow. It’s awful, and I shall want it when I come out. Bound to get fearfully messed up in the best of cases.”

The expected “Yes, sir,” failed, and the Adjutant looked up. He saw then an Alfred Tinker whom he hardly recognised—a small, warlike figure, muffled to the eyes in a greatcoat, a haversack on its shoulders, a rifle in its hand. For a moment the two men stared at each other in grim silence. Then the Adjutant laughed. “What on earth do you think you’re up to, Tinker?” he asked. “Play-acting?”

“I’m going with you, sir,” was the reply.

“Oh, no, you’re not. Don’t be a silly ass. You’re a good man where you are. You’d be a nuisance anywhere else. Besides, I want these breeches done.”

“For God’s sake, let me come with you, sir!”

“I can’t. It’s not my business anyhow. You’ve got your job. You stick to it and be thankful.”

“You mustn’t stop me, sir,” said Alfred Tinker in a stifled voice of hysterical despair, “it’s—it’s ruining my life, sir—

you mustn't do it. After all I'm a man, sir, even if I am a damned tailor—I must go. I 'listed for a soldier, and I'm going to be a soldier. I don't care if I'm shot for it. Every one's been against me—right from the very first—but I've had enough this time. I'm off—and no one's going to stop me either——”

Now, men going into action are subject to various moods. Some are jocular, some irritable, some strung up to snapping points, some merely apathetic. The Adjutant's mood at that moment was one of peevish obtuseness. He saw nothing of the tragedy which underlay this extraordinary burst of insubordination, and the insubordination itself hardly affected him. He could only think of his breeches. For a moment their fate overshadowed the whole war. He tapped his revolver significantly.

“You've been drinking, Tinker,” he said. “It's disgraceful—almost in the face of the enemy, too. You really ought to be shot for it. You are a soldier, and if you disobey orders I shall have you arrested—though I must say it would be a damned nuisance. Your orders are to stay here and put in these leathers. You understand—you stay here whatever happens. Got that clear?”

The habit of obedience is a poisonous one. It rots the soul. To his own horror and shame Alfred Tinker answered “Yes, sir,” and the butt end of his rifle struck the floor in dull surrender. The Adjutant nodded, not unkindly.

“Better get to bed and sleep it off,” he said. “You'll make no end of a mess of those breeches if you don't.”

He went off, slamming the door, and Alfred Tinker heard him clatter heavily down the wooden stairs. He heard, too, the sharp word of command and the muffled rhythmic tread of the Redmonthshires as they set off through the black night in search of glory.

And he prepared to shoot himself. He had made up his mind to shoot himself. But then his eye caught sight of the Adjutant's tunic spread out in all its shameful imperfection. He perceived the remedy. Art waged war against despair and triumphed. Very well. He would do his duty as a tailor and a soldier to the end. And his last work should be a masterpiece.

With tears of rage and grief running down his cheeks, Alfred Tinker took up the scissors.

X

It began shortly after one o'clock. Alfred had just nipped off the Adjutant's sleeve. It was gunfire, but it was not familiar. It came from a new direction and it sounded close at hand and very menacing. Alfred stopped in his work to listen to it. He then perceived other sounds. At one bound the little town seemed to have leapt to its feet. People who had been sleeping five minutes before were running down the street, shouting to one another.

Alfred filled his mouth with pins. The war had no further interest for him. It had rejected him. To all intents and purposes he was a ghost clearing up the affairs of a former existence, and he did not even look up when a red-faced, much flustered Y.M.C.A. worker burst in upon him with a series of gasping exclamations.

“The Germans—flank attack—broken through—here in half an hour—whole town to be evacuated—we're getting the W.A.A.C's out now—no time to lose—come on lend a hand, for God's sake.

Alfred removed the pins.

“Sorry,” he said. “I'm a non-combatant.” The Y.M.C.A. official gaped.

“What—in uniform!”

"Yes, it is a bit confusing," Alfred admitted. He stood in an attitude of reflection, holding on to his tape-measure as a curate holds to the two ends of his stole. "I find it confusing myself," he added with withering sarcasm. "I'm a civilian under military orders. I'm not to fight. Oh dear, no, certainly not—but I've got to do as I'm told. And I'm under orders to finish this tunic. I'm to stay here whatever happens. You see how it is——"

"You're mad!"

"Of course, I'm mad," said Alfred bitterly. "Everyone who joins the blinkin' British Army's mad. Didn't you know that?"

"I s'ppose you're a spy, then," said the Y.M.C.A. man tauntingly, "waiting for your friends."

Alfred remained unruffled.

"I don't know," he said. "Never had any orders on the subject. Don't know what I am. But I'll be shot if I don't finish this tunic——"

"What's the good of the tunic if the Germans get it?"

"Don't know. Never had any orders——"

"Oh, come on, for Heaven's sake, man!"

"Do you want to make me a deserter?" Alfred demanded, waving his scissors indignantly. "Get out!" On second thoughts, however, he followed his would-be rescuer to the top of the stairs. "You look after the W.A.A.C.'s, he shouted, "especially the one with the curly hair."

Then he went back and shut the door.

A man who is done with life is like a general. He stands on a prominence in absolute security and can take a calm, bird's-eye view of the whole situation. Alfred Tinker whistled to himself as he worked. Beyond two blazing spots of colour in either cheek and occasional outbursts of muttered taunts addressed, apparently, to the world in

general, he showed no signs of excitement or hurry. But there was so much method in his procedure that he really worked with incredible swiftness. The rolls of khaki blocked the one window as effectively as sandbags. The dusty bureaux and cupboards, in which resided the archives of the little town, made an admirable bullet-proof barricade for the door and staircase head. Alfred pushed and heaved them into position with a maniac's strength. Their heaviness and resistance raised a Berserk fury in him. They might have been his personal enemies. He kicked them. When their resistance was broken he giped at them.

“Aha, you would, would you? Thought you'd done me, did you? Thought I'd stay a damn little tailor all my life, eh? You and your bloomin' orders. I'll show you the sort of chap I am——”

In a quarter of an hour the tailoring department in the Mairie had been transformed into a veritable fortress. By this time the sharper music of rifle-firing had begun to play a staccato accompaniment to the rumble of the guns. Through an aperture in his defences Alfred made his way downstairs into the street. The dawn had broken. Fugitives and stragglers stumbled past like ghosts. For the most part they were wounded, but they were above all things leaderless, disheartened, too bewildered to know even where they were going or what had happened. The avalanche had fallen on a section where the French and British armies met. French and English jostled each other.

Alfred Tinker stood on the steps of the Mairie and yelled at them. He was like a showman at a fair—like a cheap-jack selling his wares.

“Now, then, gentlemen, walk up, walk up! Entrance free! No charges! Anyone wanting another pot at the Hun step this way! Anyone with guts in him come and

look at General Tinker's famous shooting range! All for nothing! You can fire till you drop! For to-day only! Walk up! Walk up!"

He danced, he gyrated. He waved his arms. He was possessed, he was irresistible—a dynamic force conscious of no limitations. His supreme joyousness was a prairie fire seizing upon everything that came within its reach. The Frenchmen, who could not understand a word he said, stopped at first to laugh, then to cheer. The English answered to a man. The dogged soul in them that loathed retreat seized avariciously on the frail chance that this strange Cockney apparition offered them. They caught the joke of it all. Laughing, jesting, drunk with the sudden revulsion of feeling, they poured up the steps of the Mairie—as many as their new commander asked for. The rest, no longer stragglers, but men imbued with grim purpose, hurried on to join whatever force was coming to the rescue.

All this passed between three o'clock and three-thirty. At three-thirty-five the town was deserted, the Mairie, with unguarded doors, stood wrapped in desolate silence. At four o'clock the German advance guards entered the Market Place. They, too, were perhaps intoxicated with their own swift success. At any rate, their hurried inspection betrayed nothing suspicious. They continued their pursuit of the broken enemy, whilst the main body of their forces, with a car load of be-ribboned officers, took formal possession of the conquered town. It was not until the staff, spur-jingling and arrogantly assured, entered the Mairie and stood in the empty hall issuing their orders that something happened.

The advance guards heard it, and they knew at once what it signified. The retreat had been a feint—a trap. The treacherous English had fallen mysteriously in their rear. They faltered—finally fell back precipitately on the

town, which offered a spectacle of incredible tumult. The Market Place had become a battlefield in which one man fought panic-stricken against another. The twilight added to the confusion. It took the raging, blaspheming officers twenty minutes to regain their mastery and organise the siege of the stronghold, which had blazed up in their very midst. The siege itself was short and terrible. But the twenty minutes had been fatal. Just as the last line of defence had broken down, the British and French reinforcements counter-attacked, sweeping all before them.

The hall and staircase of the Mairie were a shambles. The victors had much ado to make their way over the hideous mêlée of broken bodies and broken furniture to the remnants of the little garrison. They found Alfred Tinker lying face downwards across a table on which the Adjutant's tunic still waited completion. In one hand he clutched his scissors. Either he had seized upon them as a last available weapon or in the gathering night had returned instinctively to his natural profession.

As they lifted him his eyes opened an instant.

The man who had held him described his expression afterwards as one of unearthly happiness.

“Tinker—tailor——” he said very faintly, “soldier——”
And passed into merciful unconsciousness.

XI

Mr. Alfred Tinker has gone back to Solomon's. He has now thirty assistants under him who worship the ground he walks on. For a tailor who is at once a genius and a V.C. with five bayonet scars on his body is a leader to be proud of.

And, of course, everyone who cares for his personal appearance and a chat about the old fighting days, goes to Solomon's.

Mr. Samuel Solomon has moved his private residence from Pimlico to Mayfair. Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Tinker (*née* Edwards), whose tastes are of a less ostentatious nature, have a house in Hampstead.

It is understood that they are ridiculously happy.

VII

COLONEL TIBBIT COMES HOME

I

"I'm afraid it's no good, sir. We've sent five runners already, and we've had no answer. It's unlikely they even got through. There's a regular hailstorm above stairs."

The speaker was very tall. He had to stoop to avoid the lamp, and by a ghoulish trick of light and shadow his head seemed to float bodiless in the luminous fog which hung over the evil-smelling cellar. His face heightened the illusion, for it had already something of the arrogant serenity of death. "So I just ran down for orders," he added calmly. He waited motionless. For it was difficult to move without treading on one of the shapeless heaps that lay against the dim walls or sprawled across the floor. They were very quiet. Now and then some of them would stir and cry out, and then fall back into themselves with a dull thud. But they had no part in the scene that was being enacted in their midst. They were divided from it by an immeasurable gulf. They had gone on. Only two officers, who stood at the foot of the black upward winding staircase, listened and watched with a close yet dispassionate curiosity. One of them was smoking, and his cigarette tip burnt a bright little hole in the darkness.

"I am waiting for orders, Colonel."

The officer seated at the rickety table beneath the lamp started, and gave a nervous, pompous tug at his tunic.

"Ah—yes—orders—of course, of course." He looked about him challengingly. Contrasted with the other three, he was an old man. The light picked out pleasant silver threads from his thin hair, and his uniform fitted him with a limp resignation to failure. For though he jerked himself up for a moment it was only to collapse again into a round-shouldered, sagging ungainliness. "Orders—orders," he repeated to himself as though the word had some subtle double meaning which eluded him. He returned to the map, spread out before him, and his dirty, stubby forefingers ran up and down the clearly marked lines like a baffled terrier. Only once, when the incessant, muffled uproar overhead swept suddenly to a shrieking crescendo, his finger wavered. Then he held it to the light and examined it with a puzzled solemnity. "Of course, they'll be here any minute," he muttered. "They ought to have come up half an hour ago."

The grim, bitterly set face that gleamed palely beside him glanced across at the two watchers by the staircase. Its composure held a kind of resigned disgust.

"I don't think they can have got our message, sir," the voice persisted patiently. "And anyhow they couldn't help us now——"

"Yes, but they ought to; they can't leave us in the air like this. They ought to do something——"

"No doubt—they ought." The voice that for an instant had been sardonically amused dropped into silence as the older man slipped his hand into his breast pocket and drew out something silvery and twinkling. They watched him expressionlessly. He drank with a shameless greed, but afterwards he hid the flask under his papers as though no one had seen it.

"It's—it's unprecedented," he said plaintively. Then he

jerked himself up into a momentary attitude of indignation. "Unprecedented. Major—in all my career—assure you—their intelligence—disgraceful. No warning. I—I haven't had a chance. They ought to send relief. They ought to do something."

"It is for us to do something, sir."

"Of course—of course—all the same, I——"

"*God Almighty—don't you realise what is happening, sir? Whilst we stand here talking——*" The tall, thin man mastered himself with an effort. He made a gesture towards the patient figures huddled in the shadow. "There are wounded to consider," he said frigidly. "And in half an hour we shall be cut off. The enemy is working up round our flanks. Our men have had three days and nights of it. They're hanging on like bulldogs. But we can't expect miracles."

"Yes—you do—you do—you expect them from me."

"No, sir. Only our orders."

"Orders! What in God's name can I order?"

Overhead the muffled roar of storm receded. It made way for something else that came suddenly, stupefying like the fall of a titanic hammer. The cellar rocked and crumbled under it. The shadowy wounded lifted themselves up. Their deathly faces shone through the yellow atmosphere that was thick with dust and the stench of terror.

The major steadied the madly swaying lamp with a sure hand.

"If you wish it I can take over the command, Colonel."

The other glanced up dazedly. His blunt-featured, rugged face with its week's growth of stubble and deep lines of intolerable weariness had a baffled, frightened look. His hand fumbled under the papers for his flask. The tears stood in his eyes. They spilled over and mingled with the grey drops of sweat.

"I—I don't understand, Major."

"There's no time to mince words, sir. We're in a tight hole. If you're not feeling up to it."

"Not up to it!" He saw the direction of the tall man's involuntary glance. "My god, Major, I could 'ave you shot."

He broke off as though he had been stabbed with pain. None of the three had given a sign. Their faces were, as before, masks of imperturbable self-control. They had an air of having deliberately not heard. Yet, secretly, even at that moment they were amused. And the old man lurched to his feet, driving his great fist down on to the table so that it rocked. "The 'ole regiment dies where it stands," he flung at them.

"Do you mean that, Colonel?"

"Are you—cowards, gentlemen?"

They waited a moment—waited deliberately as though savouring a rather bitter jest. And he stood and watched them, with his tunic rucked up under his arms and his whole ungainly bulk trembling. He was not pitiable now, but terrible, like a mortally wounded bull.

"You 'ave your orders," he said.

They saluted and went up the narrow steps leading out of the cellar. The Major led the way. He had a fatalistic idea that the first man above ground would "stop one," as he put it to himself. And the other two were married and unwounded.

"I think that about finishes old Tit-bits, eh, Major?"

"—And us, incidentally," the Major had time to answer over his shoulder.

II

They dealt fairly with him, but although they exceeded him in rank they were of a younger generation, having been swept upwards by the tide of prolonged warfare, and to them he was just an old man of the old school of fighters who had failed lamentably, and even criminally, to do his duty.

Still they took what there was in his favour and weighed it—his praiseworthy rise from the ranks, his unblemished record, his unquestioned valour, to which the strip of magenta ribbon on his breast, and even the catastrophe itself, bore witness. For the sake of these things they might have labelled the act which had sacrificed a gallant regiment as an error of judgment—had it not been for the belated and reluctant testimony of two surviving officers.

What pardon could there be for a man who had wilfully befuddled himself at such a crisis—who had made himself incapable of judgment? Moreover, there were sinister rumours abroad that because the accused had married a woman of title, justice would be adulterated with official whitewash. And public opinion was aroused and very bitter.

The accused himself offered no loophole for mercy—scarcely a defence. He had been very tired, he said, and had drunk a little to give himself fresh energy. He did not know what had happened to him. But he had an air of withholding some vital truth.

He sat before his judges, a bowed, clumsy figure of a man with blue, rather childlike eyes, full of unspeakable distress.

There was no question as to the verdict—no doubt as to the final sentence that “would be promulgated in due course”.

He went out of the Court as he had come, alone, but now he had no right to the uniform he wore.

III

The passers-by glanced up at him as he lingered on the steps of the great, grey-faced building. For by this time the least military of them had learnt to recognise the insignia of rank and to know the meaning of those gay stripes of ribbon. And this grey-haired officer gave them a vicarious thrill of adventure—of pride and hope. He commanded men, and once in his life he had risen splendidly above the common level of human valour. And he was just a simple, unromantic-looking old fellow—one of themselves. In their mould heroes were made.

The soldiers smartened up in earnest as they passed him.

He stood there as though immersed in grave, impersonal consideration. The uniform lent his burliness dignity, and the peak of his cap threw a stern shadow over his face. No one could have told that he was so dazed and feeble that he was afraid to move.

At last he lumbered off the step into the crowd. It carried him westwards, but he moved slowly like a heavy log in a hurrying, shallow stream. He kept to the wallside of the pavement, and went with his head bowed, saluting mechanically—sometimes needlessly—because he dared not look up. If he looked up people would know who he was and what had happened to him. He knew that he was in everybody's mind—his shame was in everybody's mouth. There had been questions asked in the House—hints in the papers. He had seen people whispering together as he had passed through the lounge of his hotel.

"You know the Neuville affair—well, that's the man."

The burden of a million eyes weighed on his shoulders.

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They could not help but recognise him. He felt that it was written in his face. And, moreover, in his way, he had been a popular figure amidst a people who liked their heroes to be simple and even commonplace men. At every milestone in his life he had been dragged under the limelight. He remembered, in particular, a photograph of his wife and himself at their daughter's wedding—"Colonel Tibbit, V.C., and Lady Tibbit leaving the church". It had been in all the illustrated papers. That was two years ago—six months before Lady Tibbit's death.

The thought of her made him wince, as though someone had slashed a whip across his face. It made him stumble and go sick with pain.

To-morrow the papers would mention him for the last time. Then it would be gazetted. Men in India, where he had won his honours, men whom he had commanded, would stop a minute to exclaim incredulously. It would be spoken of in France—in the trenches—at the mess.

"Cashiered—old Tit-bits—good Lord!"

The regiment—what remained of it—would cover him over with its own glory. But it would not forget. The people of the men who had fallen would not forget; they would remember his name as long as they lived.

He crept deeper into himself. Sooner or later he would meet one of them—or someone whom he knew—a friend who had dined with him at his own table, who had shot with him over the famous Elderswater preserves—a young officer perhaps—a friend of his son's—who had looked up to him. And then—what then? How did one behave to a man who had been cashiered? He tried to remember how he had behaved to young Carrington who had gone that way, but his brain was numb and tired, and would not concentrate. His thoughts ran hither and thither like ants

in a disturbed ant-heap. They ran back to the scene he had just left—to the things that had been said, and further back still to the stifling cellar, to the lean, hawk-faced Major and the final catastrophe.

He stopped short. He forgot where he was. He forgot to be afraid. Wave after wave of humiliation broke over him, submerging him. How had it happened? In all those years it had not happened once—not even when he had been beside himself with rage or broken with fatigue—and then—all of a sudden——

He tottered on again, shaking his head. It was too much. He had ceased to feel or think. He was just the husk of an old man, blowing before any idle wind.

An early winter's night settled on the streets. One by one the shops closed their brazen eyes solemnly, but from under their lids furtively twinkling notices with the magic word "Open" made fun of their own cautiousness. The squat, black buildings themselves refused to take it seriously. In the daytime they were places of business—grave and inclined to be a little pompous. Now they had the look of a whole range of robber mountains whose secret portals swung open at a word, revealing hidden treasure of indescribable fascination. And the little shadowy people themselves might have been so many Ali Babas carrying off their pelf joyfully. Now and then one of them would lift a speculative glance to the frosty stars as though it was from thence the robbers might be expected to return.

"Well, if they comes they comes," a voice said at the Colonel's elbow. "But I likes to be at 'ome myself so's I can get me cup of tea afterwards."

He had blundered into the maelstrom at Piccadilly Circus, where a dense crowd watched one teeming 'bus after another lumber past with patient resignation. The woman who had

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spoken was small and elderly, and knobby with parcels. She kept on shaking her head backwards and forwards in the vain effort to restore her hat to its correct angle. "Most times I'm a winner at 'bus-raiding," she said, "but wot with all these 'ere things there ain't no fight left in me."

She smiled up at him with a tired friendliness.

"P'raps I can 'elp," he said suddenly.

People made way for him. Even in the midst of their own preoccupations they were touched at the sight of the big "brass hat" and the shabby little woman. So he had luck with the next 'bus, and just before she was swept into its dim maw she looked back at him, her hat more than ever over one ear.

"You're a real gent.," she announced shrilly; "a real gent., and 'ere's luck to yer."

The crowd laughed. They threw him good-humoured, kindly glances. It was as though they nodded agreement. "Yes, a real gent." And he smiled back quaveringly, sheltered by their warmth, their ignorance. Their spirit crept into his empty, battered heart. His identity slipped from him. He was just what they thought he was—one of themselves—an elderly soldier on leave, shopping secretly, and trying to make his way home.

And he had meant to buy something. Of course. It had been in his mind all the time. Something really splendid, that the little chap would be proud of later on. Something gorgeous, that would make even Gerald and Constance open their mouths and their eyes with astonishment and respect. And the money was in his pocket.

He pushed his way out of the crowd. He had a purpose now that kept his poor bewildered thoughts fixed and happy. He knew just what he wanted and where to get it. He had seen it in a shop window—a gold box marvellously

inlaid with enamel. It would do for a show thing until the boy grew up, and then it would do for his cigarette-box—the young beggar. The idea amused him. He was even a little proud of it. He explained it to the salesman who bowed towards him deferentially. What was the good of giving babies expensive toys which they broke, or ridiculous mugs which they didn't know what to do with when they grew up? But a swagger cigarette-box—gold and enamel—that would be something to grow up for!

He handled the vulgar, costly thing lovingly.

"Will you want it engraved, sir?"

He looked up with a vague smile in his childish blue eyes. Engraved? Of course. "To my grandson from Colonel Tibbit, V.C." That was simple and complete. It said everything. One of these days the young beggar would boast about him. "My grandfather, you know, who fought in the Great War——"

The salesman's face seemed to spring out at him from a dense mist. It grimaced at him malevolently. It threatened.

He wasn't Colonel Tibbit any more. And the face knew.

His big hands fumbled and trembled. He wanted to give the box back but he was afraid. If he didn't propitiate him the man would point at him and shout: "The Neuville affair—that's the fellow who lost the regiment. Look at him!" So he slipped the box into his pocket. He even left his change on the counter. And apparently the shopman was appeased, for when he caught him up in the street he smiled and bowed as deferentially as ever.

It was quite dark now. The old-time London that had once bedizened the night with blatant glare and vulgar wealth had become a place of enchantment, dim, mysterious, ennobled, its background a deepening silence against which

each sound, almost each footfall, stood out alone. The people came and went like ghosts haunting some forsaken city. The rare lights of the streets, the dying traffic, were like fire-flies dancing through the purple darkness. But eastwards the jagged roofs stood out, knife sharp, as though beyond them a great light was rising in solemn state.

The air was still and very cold. The late Colonel Tibbit shivered in it. His mind, that had been stung to activity by terror, wandered again. He thought vaguely that he would like to rest somewhere—in some big chair before a fire—to hold his hands out to the blaze—to sleep a little. He thought of the smoking-room in the club where the great fire roared day and night, of the rich luxurious scent of cigars, of the familiar hum of friendly voices. He was thinking of all this and hardly knew that he had crossed through into Piccadilly. He was on the park side and met no one to disturb him. The great thoroughfare shone under the brilliant moonlight like a dim, empty river, serene, untroubled, without a ripple.

And then suddenly he stopped. For opposite him was his destination. The blinds were drawn, but he could see James, the hall-porter, standing on the steps looking up earnestly at the metallic sky.

James had served all through the Boer War. He knew everyone—everything. He was a standing joke with his uncanny knowledge.

The old man hiding in the shadow had a moment of terrible lucidity. He knew that in the familiar room towards which he had turned in his despair there were friends who would look away when he entered, out of pity or disgust, and that to-morrow he would resign to save them trouble.

Where did men go who were cashiered?

•

He thought of his daughter's home in Eaton Square, and of his son's old chambers in the Albany. His son was lieutenant in the Guards and home on leave. His son and his daughter were very like their mother. He thought of the way in which they would look at him——

He thought of Elderswater, his by courtesy, of the cosy, expensive rooms in his hotel, where every servant knew him and his whole history.

What happened to men who were cashiered? Were they given little pensions by their disgraced people and told to hide themselves? But where in the whole world was there a hiding-place?

He did not know. He was quite lost now, and sick and weak, so that he clung to the park railings, crawling along like some broken old tramp. Even when the burly shadow of a policeman loomed up over him he could not hold himself upright.

"Na then—wot's orl this about?" The round eye of a lantern flashed inquisitively over the bowed figure. The Colonel's face was hidden, but not the uniform or the gaudy strips of ribbons. And the policeman was an old soldier. "Beg pardon, sir. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No—nothing—nothing."

The man lifted his face to the crescent moon riding over the city.

"First warning's out, sir. Better be getting home."

The Colonel nodded to himself. His hand groped in his pocket.

"Home," he said. "Yes, that's it—home—thank you, constable."

"Thank *you*, sir. Good 'ealth, sir, and—good-night, sir."

He moved on, stolid and imperturbable, a very epitome

of his race under a threat. Behind him two stragglers, a man and a woman, arms linked, came out into the lamplight. They too, stopped to glance skywards, and the woman put her fingers to her nose rudely.

"Stop the 'busses? You bet. And the tubes crammed like sardine-tins. If we sees 'ome to-night we 'as to foot it, old boy!"

"Wot! Orl the way to the Old Kent Road?"

"And why not? With bloomin' fire-works and a band playing to keep you in step? G'arn, Samuel. You don't 'arf want somethink for your money, you don't! Fergotten there's a war on, ain't you?"

They proceeded on their way, vociferously cheerful, and the colonel looked after them. His face was puckered with the puzzled, wistful lines of a man striving to lay hold on some old memory. For a minute it lasted. Then, like a clumsy, rudderless boat suddenly caught by the full swing of a swift current he turned and followed in the wake of the two receding shadows eastwards.

IV

When she waved to him from the ward door she was still smiling. She even winked, though his bed was too far off for him to have appreciated the effort. But outside she broke down. Everything about her seemed to go to pieces, as though she and her clothes had been hung together on a wire which had suddenly given way. When she had gone into the ward she had been rather a smart, trim figure, but now her feather hat flopped on one side, and her hair fell over her puckered face in wisps, and her coat with the real imitation skunk collar hung about her shapelessly like an old dressing-gown.

"Oh, Gawd!" she said. "Oh, Gawd!"

The nurse patted her consolingly on the arm.

"Of course, it's a shock to you. You're not accustomed to seeing people like that——"

"And you're too bloomin' well accustomed to it," Lizzy Phipps retorted viciously. "You're always seein' 'em like that. My belief is you don't know what an 'ole 'uman being looks like."

"Oh, come!" the nurse protested, smiling.

The girl rubbed the tears off her chin.

"Oh, I knows I'm a pig. I 'aven't no cause to bite *your* 'ead off, any'ow. You've all been angels to 'im—that's wot 'e said. I ought to be on me knees to you. But I ain't got the sweetest temper in the world, and when I sees 'im like that—a little bit of a white thing—'im that was so fine and upstanding—why I wants to knife somebody, for choice that old blighter, that dodderin' old shunk wot's done it all."

"It's no use blaming people," the nurse interposed quietly; "your husband might have been wounded anyhow. We ought not to blame people in authority. We don't know enough."

The girl turned on her with a curious expression on her bitter, tear-stained face.

"Some of us knows a lot more than you'd think," she said; "and I know that when a man's done one real low down dirty trick in 'is life and 'asn't owned up and paid for it 'e'd do another sooner or later, no matter if 'is 'ole chest is jingling with V.C.s. I said it long ago and it's true."

The nurse looked doubtful.

"Anyhow your husband is doing finely. You don't need to worry."

"I ain't going to worry. I'm goin' to 'ave a drink—one drink, two drinks, three drinks—till I get his poor white face out of me 'ead. That's what I'm goin' to do."

"But you can't. It's only four o'clock."

"I can wait then," the girl answered grimly. "I ain't goin' 'ome to 'is people till I'm soaked jolly, so there!"

The nurse sighed but made no protest, for her work lay in a neighbourhood where the dullest of us gets understanding. "Well, each man his own medicine," she said; "but don't get yourself into trouble."

"I carries my liquor like a lidy," the other retorted with some pride.

So it came about that Mrs. Lizzy Phipps had her three drinks and more at the "Green Lion," and as the night wore on and an uneasy peace descended upon the teeming east-end streets she became the centre of an appreciative crowd which leaned against the bar, glass in hand, and-nodded grave, slightly fuddled agreement to her bitter and pungent criticisms. By the time she had finished with them there were few lights left in England that had not begun to burn very low indeed. If they had been as resplendent electric globes in the popular imagination she turned them into penny dips flickering dimly in the wind of her wrath. She poured her Cockney wit over them with a liberality which brought her within the reach of the Defence of the Realm Act, but a policeman himself would hardly have cared to remind her of the fact. For her flushed, unhappily grinning face had a look of something withheld—something dangerous.

"And now this blighter," she exploded finally, "this old fool wot goes and chucks away 'is men for the fun of the thing—wot about 'im? Oh, I know 'e's a fine 'ero. Not much chance of forgettin' it, I 'adn't. Nothing would quiet my boy but getting into 'is regiment, and talk about 'im every time 'e come 'ome on leave—my ears, 'ow 'e talked. And now look at 'im. 'E'll never play footer agin, not in this life. I say they ought to put 'is bloomin' 'ero

up against a wall—but they won't. They'll give 'im a smack and tell 'im to run away and do it again somewhere else. I knows 'em." She brought her clenched fist down on the counter so that the glasses jingled.

"Gawd! If it weren't for them 'Uns I'd wash me 'ands of the 'ole country, I would——"

At that identical moment a maroon signal went up from the next street. The detonation seemed to silence the whole city. It was repeated at intervals, now close at hand, now in the muffled distance, till there was no corner which had not received its message. Everywhere people stood still and looked up at the night sky and said, "There they are again!" in various tones of boredom.

In the "Green Lion" the hush lasted barely a few seconds. Then a man tipped down the contents of his glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand with an air of regretful finality.

"Well, the 'erald angels 'ave turned up any'ow," he said. "I'd better be gettin' 'ome. The missis likes to 'ave us all under one roof. All die together sort o' thing. Ain't my idea. I says, 'Scatter us,' so as the 'Uns won't 'ave the satisfaction of wipin' out the 'ole 'Iggins family at one swoop. But you can't argue with wimmin. Good night, lidies and gents."

He sauntered out through the swinging doors and the rest of the company followed him, all but one fatalist who ordered another pint.

"I sticks to me beer to the bitter end," he said, "and if I dies I dies 'appy."

The dark streets showed a passing liveliness. Belated revellers made their way home, and whole families laden with treasure and all the contraptions essential to an evening picnic streamed towards the Tubes. Such dogs and

cats as could be smuggled under shawls and aprons went with them, and the air was full of muttered injunctions to " 'urry up and not to let 'em bark."

But gradually the bustle passed. By the time Lizzy Phipps had reached her destination all but a few inveterate sightseers had sought shelter. The street was quiet and apparently empty. The squat little houses that had an air of having once been cottages in a country lane, were wrapped in dignified silence. They had no part with the overcrowded, noisy tenements of the great thoroughfare. They had their own way of meeting danger—their own memories and traditions.

Lizzy Phipps had her key in the latch when the distance shook with the first rumble of guns. She looked back. She knew the whole business by heart now—when the outer defences were at work, and when things were getting too hot to be comfortable, and even the quality of the guns themselves—and it had long since ceased to be amusing. Nevertheless, there was always a certain joy in watching the great searchlights hunting across the sky. They were the most beautiful things Lizzy Phipps had ever seen, and she wanted to have one look at them.

It was then she noticed the man leaning against the railings. He had been so motionless that she had passed him by as a shadow, but now he moved suddenly—it was almost as though he wanted to see past her through the half open door—and she caught a glimpse of his white face. She knew that he was in some sort of uniform, but as her eyes accustomed themselves to the half-light she saw that it was tattered and dishevelled-looking. There was a long horizontal tear on the left breast of his tunic as though something had been ripped off.

"You'd better be getting 'ome, old chap," she said over

her shoulder. "Even if you *are* drunk you'll be safer there."

He did not answer, and she lifted her red, swollen eyes back to the sky across which the searchlights swept in disciplined but baffled pursuit. For the crescent moon, now at her zenith, drank up their strength. She seemed to lure them on with promises of help whilst she hid the malignant thing they sought. There was something evil about her—like a pallid witch.

The guns were silent. They held their breath, waiting. When they spoke again Lizzy Phipps, for one, knew that the enemy had broken through. Their chorus was a continuous roar. The shells ripped the air overhead like a sheet of calico. And in the midst of this there sounded, curiously isolated and distinct, a low-pitched, ominous droning.

Lizzy Phipps ran down the steps. She seized the unknown man by the arm.

"You come along," she said curtly. "We don't want no funerals in this street."

And she dragged him in, slamming the door just as the earth rocked under a terrific, reverberating blow.

V

"It's all right, Mammy. No 'arm done. Keep your 'air on, there's a dear!"

The narrow passage was in darkness except at the far end, where a door which apparently led underground showed a faint reflected light. The shadow of a woman flitted before it like a ghost.

"Oh, Lizzy, Lizzy, where have you been?"

The girl answered with a gruff, unwilling tenderness.

"Oh, go hon with you, Mammy, you're always anxious.

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As though anything ever 'appened to my sort. 'Ere, I've brought you a drunk. Leanin' up against the railings 'e was as though the place belonged to 'im. I ain't givin' the 'Un anything for nothing, so I brought 'im in. My word, it was a near thing, too!"

"They're overhead. Come down quick. We're all there. Father's almost asleep."

"Lucky to be deaf these nights." She jerked her companion's arm. "Now you come quiet," she urged. "The cellar steps aren't much catch for anyone in your state and you've been near enough to trouble for one evening." Then something in his silence, his feeble clinging to her touched her to pity. "Poor old boy! Ain't 'arf shaken up, are you? Ought to 'ave been tucked up in bed hours ago. Hold tight." But he did not stumble, not even over the last step of all, which was a trap for the unwary, and she congratulated him. "Might be at 'ome, you might," she said.

The cellar was low-roofed and dark, smelling mustily of old, discarded things. Wooden boxes, broken sticks of furniture, waste strips of carpet which had found their home there had been pushed aside or made to serve a new purpose. There was a divan of straw over a ragged mattress, and a candle stuck in its own grease stood on a soap-box table in the midst of cups, a tin kettle, and a battered spirit lamp. Though it gave a frail uncertain light, there was something brave and cheerful about it, as though with the rest of its companions it was making the best of trouble.

A very old man sat on the mattress nursing a bundle that whimpered feebly. He and his charge were so wrapped in blankets that they were almost hidden, but as the barrage overhead reached the height of its frenzy, a solemn, distressed old face lifted itself to the light.

"They didn't ought to do such things," he reproved drowsily. "Tain't right—'tain't Christian."

And slept again.

Lizzy Phipps laughed.

"Christians! Oo's a Christian in this bloomin' world? Oo wants to forgive 'is enemies? I don't." She let go her hold on the stranger's arm and he slipped away from her and crouched down in the shadow, his hand over his eyes. He had lost his cap, and she saw that he was grey-haired and that his hands trembled. "Short of a direct 'it we're as safe as the Bank of England," she comforted roughly, "and if we gets a direct 'it—well we sha'n't know it, so it's orl right any'ow."

But he did not answer, and the other woman looked at him across the candle-flame.

"It comes hard on some of us," she said gently. She was past middle-age. The hair, smoothed down gravely on either side of the small head, was worn thin, and the light cut the lines about her mouth and eyes to deep, sorrowful furrows. But the mouth itself had a certain sweetness and the eyes were young because of their expression of simple faith. They looked as though they had always hoped and believed the best. "One worries so about other people," she said. "If we're all together it seems easier. Oh, Liz, we've been so anxious—it's been so terrible waiting. We didn't know what to think. Why didn't you come back?"

Lizzy Phipps crouched down against the wall, her arms clasped about her knees, her hair hanging like a black web over her sunken, unhappy face.

"I couldn't," she said, "I wasn't coming 'ome feeling as I did. It wouldn't 'ave been fair. The nurse said 'e was doing fine—but I couldn't see it like that. I'd 'ave frightened you. I 'ad to get my feet first." She ground her

teeth together. "Even now I can see 'im lying there with this going on over 'is 'ead, and 'im 'elpless, not able to save 'imself or to 'it back."

"Was he so bad, Liz?"

The girl stretched out her arms with a simple tenderness.

"'E was just a kid—just a 'andful. I could 'ave picked him up—like that—and carried 'im. And 'is voice—it might 'ave been a bird chirping. Gawd! It fair did fer me. I sat there grinning and winking, and making silly jokes so 'e shouldn't know. But inside, I was crying me 'eart out."

"Poor Jim—my poor Jim!"

"'E'll never run again," the girl muttered, "nor play footer no more." She sat with her face between her fists, staring blackly across the light, and for a moment the shadowy cellar was very still. The gunfire had shifted northwards. They felt rather than heard its muffled, continuous beat upon the earth. "I wouldn't 'ave felt it so," the girl went on sombrely, "if it had been for something worth while. 'E ain't the only one—I knows that. I didn't make no fuss when 'e went. I was ready for 'im to do 'is bit even if 'e never came back. But for nothing—just chucked away—scrap-'eaped because an old scamp couldn't do without 'is booze."

"That isn't true, Liz."

"Oh, isn't it?" She turned her fierce eyes on the older woman with a look almost of hate. "Oh, you'd say that of course. But other people knows better. There's talk in Parliament, and it's in the papers. There was a chap at the 'Green Lion' whose brother was in the regiment. 'E was in the very place where the order was given. 'E said the old man couldn't stand straight nor talk straight. 'E

was just gabbling nonsense. And upstairs the boys were being blown to bits. But 'e didn't care. 'E got 'is V.C. and 'is cushy job. 'E could sit tight and swig——"

"It isn't true," the old woman said quietly and authoritatively.

Lizzy Phipps threw back her dishevelled head and laughed. She laughed till the baby woke with a feeble cry, and the old man looked up, blinking and distressed.

"It ain't Christian," he said, "not to do things like that."

"You and 'im!" Lizzy Phipps flung out in wild scorn. "You make me sick. You'd stick up for 'im if 'e killed you. You'd say: 'Please Gawd, it ain't true—'e didn't do it'. I reckon when 'e married 'is precious Lady Wibbs you just threw up your eyes to 'Eaven and said, 'It's all for the best. 'E's done the right thing.' And now that 'e's 'arf killed your boy you ain't got a word to say. You won't believe what everyone knows."

The old woman clasped her gnarled, work-stained hands patiently.

"They don't know. Not really. It's better to think kindly."

"Oh, no, it ain't—not always—not by a long way." She drew herself up like someone who after long, bitter restraint closes with an enemy. "You listen 'ere, Mammy. You shall 'ave it straight for once. You've nigh on messed up my life, you and Jim, between you—with your kindly thinking. It weren't kindly. It was proud—blind proud. Oh, you couldn't kid me. I saw it in your face that day, Jim brought me 'ome as 'is girl. 'She ain't good enough.' That's what you thought. And I've seen it in Jim's face, too, though 'e loved me. I've seen 'im thinking. 'Supposing I got on, too—wot abart 'er?' Because 'e knew I wasn't classy and never could be—'cause I don't speak

fine like you and Jim 'ave learnt to do and never shall. And when Jim got into that regiment I knew what 'e was thinking of, and it fair broke my 'eart." She gulped down the rising tears with a fierce, angry effort. "You've 'ad 'im in your minds all the time," she stammered; "you've never forgotten—you've never let Jim forget. It's been a sort of precious secret between you. You looked up at 'im as though 'e were a bloomin god—trying to be worthy of 'im—'im as did the meanest, dirtiest thing a man can do, and you looked down on me, 'oo would 'ave given my life to save Jim's little finger—or yours, Mammy, because I was common dirt."

"No, no, Liz."

The girl laughed again.

"Well, now look at your fine 'ero," she sneered. "Look at 'im. There aint nothing to be proud of now. If 'e'd been a poor Tommy they'd 'ave put 'im up against a wall and shot 'im. Drunk 'e was."

"That isn't true," the old woman repeated gently. "I know it isn't."

They had forgotten the man huddled against the wall, but now he moved suddenly and violently, so that the rough table was overturned and the candle spluttered and went out. In the confined space the noise of falling crockery was deafening—terrifying. It synchronised with the returning boom of the guns, and in a moment the cellar had grown hot and stifling with panic.

No one spoke. The pitch darkness cut them off from each other. Each in his own utter isolation came back to the reality.

"They're nearer again," Lizzy Phipps whispered at last. "I thought it was a bomb. I wish I knew where I 'ad my matches. Wot cher do it for, old boy?"

"I couldn't bear it," the man answered loudly and passionately. "It was the same—out there—the noise—and the light—and the faces—I couldn't bear it." They turned amazedly in the direction of his voice. It was as though they realised him for the first time. He went on again, but in a changed tone—half-pompous, half-pitiful, each word separated by a sort of gasp. "He only drank a mouthful just to steady himself," he said. "It wasn't that—I—I assure you. He had had trouble, and then something happened—unexpected—and he broke down. He couldn't stand it. People say he was drunk. It—it was just trouble."

The old woman nodded to herself.

"I knew that." The old woman bent forward as though she were trying to come nearer to him. "He wasn't that sort. A man couldn't do what he did and not be sober and straight. Think of it, when 'e went to India he was just a common Tommy—Alf Tibbit, of the 42nd——" She stopped for an instant, and they knew that she was smiling to herself. Through the venomous screaming of the shells overhead they waited for the comfort of her voice. "It was in a frontier war that his chance came," she said eagerly, like a child reciting a well-learned lesson. "His company had been sent on ahead to reconnoitre, and was ambushed by an overwhelming force of the enemy. All Sergeant Tibbit's officers were either killed or wounded, and no help came. Sergeant Tibbit rallied his men, and by extraordinary skill and courage extricated them and brought them back with all his wounded to the main force. Sergeant Tibbit risked his life repeatedly for his comrades, and his conduct is beyond all praise." The little recitation was at an end. "It was in all the papers," she said simply. "And they gave him the V.C."

Lizzy Phipps threw back her head with her vitriolic laugh.

"'E was out for it," she said, "a pot 'unter!"

"And later on he won his commission," the old woman continued steadily. "Though he was just a poor Tommy they couldn't hold him back. He was a fine soldier. People loved him too—his men and all the grand people there—and—and he married a real lady.

"A real lady—to 'ave married 'im!"

"And proud she must have been," the woman answered. "He was the best set-up man in the Army—tall and handsome he was. Any woman might have been proud."

Lizzy Phipps waited a moment, like a tiger-cat before it springs.

"Did you ever 'ear tell of the girl 'e left be'ind 'im?" she asked—"and of the kid—of 'ow 'e never came back, but left them both to shame and misery. Did you ever 'ear that of your precious 'ero, Mister?"

"Oh, Liz, you haven't any right to say that? No one has. He couldn't have come back. He was an officer and a gentleman. It wouldn't 'ave been fair—not to his country—not to—to anyone. It was kinder of him just to forget."

"He didn't forget," the man said out of the darkness—"not ever."

"I knew that," she answered.

"He was always thinking of them." His voice came back to them pitifully changed—not pompous any more, but thick with pain—rough with the familiar accent of their streets. "He never forgot. That was it. Couldn't forget anything—not who he was—nor where he came from—nor the way he used to talk and eat. He used to dream at night—every night—that he'd done something—said something in a crowd of people, and that they'd looked at him—not laughing—because *they* wouldn't do that—but amused

and polite and scornful. Sometimes he'd use his knife wrong—or he'd drop his aitches. Hours and hours he'd practice his aitches—in his room—by himself—trying to make them come easy and natural. But they never would."

"Wot's it matter—dropping your aitches any'ow?" Lizzy Phipps demanded. "Bloomin' affectation."

But the man did not hear her. He pressed on with a feverish eagerness.

"At first he was a good soldier," he said. "That came natural to him all right. Sometimes he used to feel it like—like a sort of call from God—so that he had to go on over everything—everybody. But he had not reckoned with having to be a gentleman, too. He got to watch his brother-officers—seeing what they did and how they did it—trying to copy them. Always trying. He tried till he couldn't think of anything else. He'd given up everything to be a soldier—to get on. But he forgot all that. It didn't seem to matter. He knew that he'd have to be a gentleman first. And on top he was one—a sort of one. He got a grip on himself so that he didn't do or say what he wanted to—what came easy to him. But underneath it was always the same—always Alf Tibbit of the Old Kent Road. It was like being haunted—followed by some one who might jump out at you any minute. And his wife knew. She'd married him because she liked men who did things—fame and all that—and she was 'eadstrong in a cold sort of way. But he never did anything again. He just jogged along—doing the correct thing—worrying about Alf Tibbit—afraid of him. And she got to know—and afterwards the children. And they looked down on him and laughed at him in their sleeves. They hated him, too. He wasn't their sort. He was just a shoddy make-believe. They used to watch him trying to be like them. If he'd

been anyone else they'd have thought him just funny, but he was their father—and—and they hated 'im."

"Gawd!" said Lizzy Phipps under her breath.

She did not jeer now. The ferocious contempt was lost in wonder at the picture which he painted against the darkness. It was like a heart-rending movie. And she loved movies.

"'E was never happy—never," he said pitifully.

"I knew that, too."

In the thin old voice there sounded a sorrowful triumph.

"And the old Alf Tibbit wouldn't let him alone. He was always asking for old things and the old places—worrying him for them. In the fine houses—at the fine dinners he was always there—remembering—jogging his elbow."

He laughed tremendously like a child amused in the midst of tears. "Winkle soup he was always asking for—always wanting winkle soup."

"And no blame to 'im," said Lizzy Phipps. "Winkle soup's all right."

"But he couldn't have it—no more than the old place or the old people. Turtle and oyster he could have had, but it wasn't what Alf Tibbit wanted. And, besides, he wasn't a good soldier any more. His men knew. He would have chucked it all, but it was all he had left, and he'd given too much for it."

The old woman sighed deeply to herself.

"Poor boy, poor boy!"

"And then the War came."

"That was 'is chance," said Lizzy Phipps.

"He wasn't fit to take it. It came ten years too late. He knew, but he hadn't the pluck to resign. He just hoped for the best. So long as things went straight he thought he could hold out; but they didn't—something frightful—un-

expected—happened. The regiment lost contact—on both flanks—and the enemy was creeping up—and he had to choose.” He stopped, panting, as though with physical exhaustion, and when he went on again it was in a voice that seemed to shrink and wince at its own sound. “It was in a cellar—like this—full of wounded men—and this noise, only ten times worse. And they stood—waiting—and he couldn’t think. He’d been a rotten soldier and a sham gentleman too long. Then he drank a little, trying to steady himself, and the Major saw and hinted—hinted that he wasn’t fit—and he lost his head and shouted, ‘My God, Major, I could ’ave you shot!’ It was like one of the dreams come true. They stood there and looked at him—just as he knew they would—not laughing—just amused—wondering how he got there.”

“Go on,” Lizzy Phipps whispered.

“Then he went to bits—cracked like an empty eggshell. He couldn’t reason any more. He was blind mad. He could only hang on to the one thing—that he mustn’t run—that he must stick his ground. They shouldn’t ever say Alf Tibbit ran. They shouldn’t laugh at him for that.”

“He was always a great fighter,” the old woman declared. “They couldn’t expect Alf Tibbit to retreat.”

Lizzy Phipps frowned.

“Poor blighter!”

“Yes. He hadn’t any luck. He wasn’t killed. Others were, but not him. When it was all over they sent him home, and to-day—a few hours ago—they finished it—he was cashiered.”

“Cashiered!” Lizzy Phipps echoed. “Wot’s it mean? Where do chaps go wot’s cashiered?”

“There wasn’t anywhere to go. Nowhere. His wife was dead. But there were his children—and his friends—

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his servants—the people who had lost their boys—because of him—people everywhere—who knew. There was nowhere to go—just the streets.”

“He ought to ’ave told ’em—explained—they’d ’ave understood—that’s not one’s folks are for.”

“They weren’t his people. After a bit he didn’t care any more. They didn’t belong to ’im—never ’ad. If only his people would understand.”

“’E orter give ’em a chance.”

“—so he came back to the old place.”

The gunfire had rolled away into the far distance. It was very still. And in the stillness they could hear the sound of some one crying. The old man who had slept lifted his head.

“Ain’t Christian,” he mumbled to himself—“all this ’ating of one another.”

VI

Lizzy Phipps had lit the lamp, and he looked about him and saw how little it had all changed. Things had grown older and shabbier, but at heart they were the same. There were the books laid out neatly and at regular intervals round the mahogany table, the glass cases of wax fruit, and the enlarged photographs of pleasant, plain-faced people smiling stiffly.

The old woman opened one of the books and laid it before him, and he saw that it was pasted full with newspaper cuttings. And each cutting had its inscription written at its side in a painful laborious hand: “Sergeant Tibbit, V.C., at the Investiture,” “Captain Tibbit, V.C., and Lady Dorothea Tibbit, St. George’s, Hanover Square.” “Colonel Tibbit, V.C., and the Elderswater Boy Scouts.”

“It was very kind of you, Em, to care.” He put his

trembling hand on the last page. "There'll be one more to-morrow," he said, "just one more."

"We've been so proud," she said.

Her eyes were hidden. But the tears ran down the deep furrows on her cheeks, and she did not seem to know that she was crying.

He tugged at the tunic from old habit, and his hand touched the square bulk in his pocket. He drew out the gold and enamel box.

"I bought it for my grandson." He seemed to be fumbling for words—for some half-formed thought, and because it wouldn't come he shook his head sadly. "I'm getting old," he said. "I'm not the man I was once, Em."

Lizzy Phipps came out of the dark passage.

"You ain't going," she said. "It ain't safe. They might begin again."

"I ought to have been shot," he said; "it would have been better—not to have come in. I just wanted you to know—'ow it was—I wanted Em to know."

But she barred his way.

"You ain't going," she said. "My Jim 'd never forgive me. And 'e was right, too, though 'e made me bitter angry at the time. 'Don't you listen to no talk, Liz,' 'e whispers to me, weak as a kitten. 'E was a fine soldier. There ain't one of us alive or dead as wouldn't tell you so. And I'm proud of 'im.'"

"We shall always be proud," the grey-haired woman said gently.

"I'd better go," he muttered. "I'd better go, Em."

But she followed him. Her hand rested with eagerness on his arm.

"D'you need to be going, Alf? They've had you all these years—and I've waited—in the old place—just on the

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chance." Her lips quivered into a smile. "I still make winkle soup, Alf."

Lizzy Phipps held open the front door. They heard her calling.

"There—listen all of you—ain't that the finest carol?"

They heard it then—sounding faint and thrilling through the tense stillness of the streets.

"All clear! All clear!"

The old hand slipped down to his and held it strongly and joyfully.

"You've come home, Alf; you've come home."

VIII

"MELIA, NO GOOD"

I

SOME people may think this rather a sad story. But Amelia Alexandria Nobbs, whom it most concerns, would have been puzzled by such an opinion. To her it was just everyday life, not in the least touching or thrilling or anything else, but with a glorious ending which certainly did bring it almost on a level with a picture-palace romance—the only sort of romance she had ever known. At any rate, she was never sad about it—not at any time.

Ambrose Nobbs was Amelia Alexandria's father, and in addition, as Mrs. Nobbs often declared, a trying specimen of a very trying sex. For one thing, the most ordinary events drove him to extremes, which met, as extremes often do, in the nearest public-house. Thus, when Henry Nobbs—Amelia's elder brother—was born, Mr. Nobbs drank himself into an Olympian state of exuberance and pride, and was only brought to earth a week later when the callous refusal of an unfeeling barman acquainted him with the fact that the lately increased and glorious family of Nobbs had temporarily "gone bust". Contrariwise, when five years later Amelia Alexandria made her unwelcome appear-

ance, Mr. Nobbs became melancholic. In vain the most royal and high-sounding names were chosen for the luckless and unlovely stranger. Mr. Nobbs persisted in feeling aggrieved.

“A gal!” he ejaculated bitterly. “A bloomin’ gal! No good they ain’t—no good at all. One woman in the ’ouse is one too many, that’s wot I say.”

After which unchivalrous declaration Mr. Nobbs had another pint and wept copiously over his sorrows.

The process of drowning his sorrow was a lengthy one; in fact, it was a very tough sorrow with any amount of life, so that with the best will in the world Mr. Nobbs never got the better of it, though he stuck to the task with a heroic constancy. About the same time Mrs. Nobbs herself began to be “took bad”. Whether she caught her husband’s pessimistic attitude towards life, or whether the task of making two seriously estranged ends meet was too much for her, cannot be said. At any rate, by the time Amelia Alexandria was fourteen Mrs. Nobbs had completely lost her taste for charing, and the increasing frequency of her “attacks” made visits to the “Welsh Harp” a daily necessity. There she discoursed at length and with eloquence to a sympathetic audience who agreed that “Mrs. Nobbs ’ad ’ad an ’ard life,” and enthusiastically accepted her invitation to “’ave another”.

“And the ’ardest blow of all ’as been ’Melia,” Mrs. Nobbs would conclude tearfully. “My belief is she ain’t quite sixteen ounces to the pound as they say, and that ugly! Though I says it as shouldn’t, she didn’t get ’er looks from me, Gawd be thanked. She ain’t no good for anything is ’Melia.”

’Melia grew up with the phrase ringing in her ears.

II

She woke long before the winter sun had begun to show itself wanly through the grey fog which never really lifted from the roofs of Mountjoy Alley. It had become an instinct—this regular waking—but for once she lay still, wondering why on this particular morning it should be different from all the others. Then she remembered. Cautiously, like an anxious mouse, she crept out from underneath the sacking which filled the double role of sheet and blanket, and reached out for her stockings. They were very remarkable stockings, and when Amelia's toes emerged from the large unconventional apertures they wriggled indignantly, rubbing each other, in a frenzied effort to keep warm.

Amelia paid no attention to their woes, but set them to feel their way over the bare boards. From long experience they knew of the perilous possibility of encountering nails, or bits of glass, or Mr. Nobbs's discarded boots, so they went gingerly and noiselessly. 'Melia knew just where everything was to be found and what to avoid. There was Mr. Nobbs himself in one corner and Mrs. Nobbs in the other with the twins between them in a large converted soap-box. Perhaps some people may think the garret improperly overcrowded, but in Mountjoy Alley, five to a room was considered a decent average.

A subdued chink of cracked china and a timid splash, mingled with the family's deep breathing, announced that 'Melia washed. Then all was quiet again, until at the other end of the room a match spluttered feebly. With blue, stiff fingers 'Melia ordered the scanty sticks and the precious lumps of coal, and presently a small, smoky fire sent a pale

comfort into the shivering darkness. It was the great moment in 'Melia's day.' There was so much greyness all about her, with never a bright colour or a bright light anywhere. If there had ever been any colour in Mountjoy Alley it had grown dim long since. The sky was grey, and the houses were grey, and the puddles in the street and the people who slipped like ghosts in and out of the murky doorways. Even the sunshine, when it *did* come, had a dingy tinge.

But the fire kindling before daybreak in the poky little grate was a wonderful thing. It was a friendly spirit that sprang from nowhere and glowed and twinkled and warmed 'Melia's frozen little hands lovingly. It showed her fairy castles in its red heart, and its smoke wreathed itself into goblins who leapt out at her and disported themselves among the shadows.

Later on, when the daylight slunk through the dirty windows, it was just like all the other Mountjoy fires—very sickly, smoky and disgruntled.

The crackling of the wood aroused the twins, who himpered, and their whimpering aroused Mrs. Nobbs, who groaned terribly. From the opposite corner came the muffled sound of Mr. Nobbs's early morning curse.

"That you 'Melia?"

"Yus, Dad."

"Tea ready?"

"Water ain't biled yet."

"Well, 'urry up, can't yer? D'yer want a poor working man to go out into the cold without even a cup o' tea? A nice thing! Where'd you be, I'd like to know, if I was took? If that tea ain't ready when I am, my gal, somebody 'll be sorry about it——"

Mrs. Nobbs heaved herself up against the wall with another groan.

"If I ain't gone and got 'em again!" she exclaimed gloomily. "Somethink awful. Just 'ere—in me side. Oh, yer may well laugh, Hambrose Nobbs! Wot cher know about a wimmin's sufferin's? And 'oo's fault is it I 'ave to be 'ere in all this misery—me wot used to 'ave a 'ouse of me own and a parlour with plush furniture—'oo's fault is it——?"

Her voice had risen to a wail, and Mr. Nobbs flung his boot in her direction. But his aim was not what it had been, and the boot struck the soap-box, causing the contents to howl in unison.

"'Old yer tongue, will you?"

"I won't 'old my tongue. Gawd knows it's about all that's left me. 'Melia, when you've done messin' with that tea you can stop them kids yellin'. Ain't yer got no 'eart for yer poor mother's nerves?"

The tea was made by this time. It was a very simple process. All you did was to put a couple of spoonfuls of "special blend" into the kettle and let it stew. When the water was nearly black it was called tea, and you drank it with the assurance that you were getting your money's worth.

'Melia fetched the twins one by one and set them sniffing and sobbing in their grubby little shirts before the fire. She carried them, tottering under their weight, for though it was only five years since they had been added to Mrs. Nobbs's other grievances, they had thriven strangely. But 'Melia, somehow, had not thriven. It was as though their boisterous vitality had sapped the life in her. She was fourteen, and she looked like a stunted, fragile child of ten.

Mr. Nobbs, half-dressed by now, his braces hanging, slipped over to the fire and poured himself out a mug of tea with a shaking hand. He, too, was part of the greyness

—grey-haired, grey stubble on leaden, sunken cheeks. Compared with him, Mrs. Nobbs, still propped up and groaning dismally, with the firelight on her baggy, weak-featured face, seemed the embodiment of life.

“Wot about me, eh? Ain't I goin' to get nothin'? Not that I expect it. Oh, no, not me. I know wot 'appens to them 'oo toils themselves to skin and bone for others. Left to starve in their beds—that's it—starve in their——”

“Oh, take 'er 'er tea, can't yer? Look 'ere, if you two brats don't stop that row I'll bash yer 'eads together, I will.”

'Melia came back to the fire and crouched down beside the twins, who, regaled with a mug of tea and a slab of stale bread, continued to sniff, but at increasingly long intervals. Mr. Nobbs glanced at her resentfully. She was not even a pretty child. The little narrow face that peered out from amidst short, wispy black hair was old—inexpressibly old. It was almost repellent in its unyouthfulness. It gave people who saw her for the first time the same sense of shock and vague physical discomfort as the face of a grown man or woman with a dwarfed body. It gave Mr. Nobbs, whose nervous system was at its worst in the early morning, an attack of what he called the “jim-jams”.

“I don't see wot you've got to look blue about,” he burst out fiercely. “You ain't got to turn out in the cold to earn bread for a lot of greedy brats. You can sit 'ere and roast yourself. Wot 'ave you got to grumble at? I'd like to know.”

'Melia blinked at the fire.

“Nothink.”

“Well, then, don't do it. Look cheerful!” A sudden recollection came to him. “Fourteen to-day, ain't yer?”

'Melia nodded, and Mr. Nobbs growled disgustedly.

“Fourteen years of bad luck, that's wot it's been. Well,



you don't 'ave to go to school no more, that's one good thing."

"Teacher said——"

"Well, wot did yer teacher say?"

"——p'raps I might go on a bit."

"Go on? Wot for? Wot's the use of larin' you anythink? You ain't no good. Fourth standard, ain't it?"

"Yus."

"Fourth standard!" Think of that! Why, when 'Enry left he was in the seventh—top of it too—eh, mother?"

It was not often that Mr. Nobbs addressed Mrs. Nobbs as "mother". But at the name "'Enry" a change had come over them all. Even the twins sat still with an awed look on their small, smeary faces. It was as though a magician had lifted for a moment the cloud of squalor and misery and hopelessness from the garret. The fire seemed to burn more clearly. It danced its reflection pryingly on the five faces that were turned to it in sudden thoughtfulness. The sullen, peevish resentment in Mr. Nobbs's eyes had brightened to a look of triumph. Mrs. Nobbs smiled a slow, fat smile.

"Yus, 'e *was* a clever lad, was 'Enry!"

"'E'll get somewhere before 'e's done, you can tike my word for it. I saw 'im the other day, walking with a gal—a reg'lar lady. And 'e 'ad a bowler 'at and an overcoat like them swells 'ave, with skirts to it, an' a button 'ole—a carnation."

"Why, Ambrose, you never told me! Did you speak to 'im?"

Mr. Nobbs's eyelids dropped. He rubbed the knees of his shabby trousers with the palms of his hands.

"No, I didn't. Wot cher tike me for? 'Im a gent and me a workin' man. A nice thing! But I watched 'im—I

followed 'im for a bit. It made me come over queer to think of that fine young chap bein' my son——”

In the following silence 'Melia's voice sounded thin and quavering.

“Teacher said, p'raps if I stayed on——”

Mr. Nobbs sprang up with a roar.

“Never you mind wot your teacher said! I won't 'ave none of it. You'll come 'ome and 'elp your mother and your poor old father. We've kept you idle long enough. You've got to earn your keep now, d'yer 'ear?”

'Melia heard. She began to dress the twins, and their unquenchable exuberance kept her from further unwelcome manifestations. Presently Mr. Nobbs went out. Nobody inquired as to his return. No one knew what he did with his day, and since he provided nothing towards the upkeep of the establishment, nobody cared. It was presumed that he earned enough to pay for his drinks, and that was all that could be expected of him.

'Melia washed the mugs and brought what order was possible into the squalid chaos. By that time the window had begun to show a pale outline, and in the cold, grey reality of daylight the fire grew dim and colourless. Mrs. Nobbs twisted her red, ungainly fingers impatiently in the dirty coverlet.

“Near time for you to be off, ain't it, 'Melia?”

“Yus, Ma.”

“'Melia!”

“Yus?”

“Look 'ere, you ask Mrs. Pugmire to let you 'ave a bit in advance, there's a good girl. On the way 'ome you can get a drop or two at the “'Arp”. Them pains is coming on frightful. You wouldn't 'ave your poor old mother suffer, would you, 'Melia?”

"P'raps Mrs. Pugmire won't."

A dull flush crept under the coarse skin. Mrs. Nobbs leant out over the bed and caught her daughter by the arm with a strength that had made her famous in earlier days.

"You'll do as I tell you, you ugly little tike, and no back chat either! D'yer 'ear?"

'Melia heard. She showed no sign of resentment or pain. It was all part of life. She took a dilapidated black straw hat from a nail in the wall and set it on her small head with a wistful care. Once it had been a very beautiful hat with flowers round the crown, and even now three dilapidated daisies still clung dejectedly to their moorings. They gave 'Melia a queer warm thrill when she looked at them. It was like looking at the fire—she did not know why. Nor did she know in the least that it was a thrill of happiness.

"You 'urry up, now!" said Mrs. Nobbs drowsily.

The door closed, and the wooden stairs creaked under the flying feet.

Mrs. Nobbs heaved over with her face to the wall and slept the sleep of the just.

III

Mrs. Pugmire was on the doorstep polishing a massive brass plate on which was inscribed: "Jenkins and Smythe, Solicitors. Commissioners for Oaths," a description which thereafter lent Mr. Nobbs's language an awful official solemnity in 'Melia's ears. Mrs. Pugmire had also been making up fires, and her round, good-natured face was black.

"Bit late, ain't yer, 'Melia?"

"Yus. Mother was took bad again." She was panting, and her thin little legs trembled under her. "Spasims," she added impressively.

Mrs. Pugmire made a face at the “solicitors”.

“Well, get along in. First room on the right. I've put a duster on the table for you. You make things clean and tidy before the gents come. They'll be that angry if they find us about. They likes to think the hangels dusted for 'em in the night. You'll 'ave to 'urry.”

'Melia hurried. She hid her hat under a table, and, having found the duster, set to work with the fierce, desperate energy of an apprentice hand. The yellow dinginess of the place did not depress her, for that, too, was only normal, but the solemn book-cases, the great desks and amazingly high stools were vaguely terrifying. They watched her in severe, judicial silence. They disapproved of her. When she tried to dust their loftiness they seemed to draw themselves up to their full height, disdaining her. She scurried to and fro among them bravely, but she was so small that she had to scramble up on to the high stools to reach the desks at all, and the ascent and descent were alike perilous.

And hunting at her heels was the thought of the “gents” and their possible and awful anger.

She was perched on the highest stool of all—a treacherous thing with a slithery, polished seat which had already unhorsed her once—when the door opposite opened and a young man entered. 'Melia could just see him over the top of a barrier of inkpots. An unbiassed observer would not have been particularly impressed by the apparition. He had fair, lank hair, a pink face inclined to pimples, and a red tie—a very ordinary young man, in fact. But if St. George in full armour with the dragon ignominiously in tow had burst upon her 'Melia could not have been more overwhelmed. She clutched at the largest inkpot, which tipped over with obliging promptness and sent a blue stream down the desk on to the floor. As to the young man, he shut

the door behind him in the most approved manner of melodrama. His jaw had dropped.

"Amelia! what the dickens are you up to here?"

'Melia gulped.

"Charin'—'elpin' Mrs. Pugmire."

"What for?"

"Tuppence——"

"Oh, I don't mean that! Why aren't you at school?"

"Don't go to school no more."

"Didn't you know I was here?"

"No. Didn't know nothink—not where you was, 'Enry."

The young man recovered his composure. Very deliberately he divested himself of his overcoat and hat and hung them up behind the door. 'Melia, who still clung to her perch, watched him in awe-struck silence. It was true. There was the fashionable coat—"skirts" and all—and the buttonhole and the bowler. When he discovered the still flowing stream of ink she was less stricken with horror at her own deed as joy at the perfection of his disgust.

"Clumsy little blighter, aren't you?"

"Yus." She mopped up the ink with Mrs. Pugmire's duster, thereby for ever forfeiting her right to tuppence. "Ma says I ain't no good at nothink," she added humbly.

Henry Nobbs did not offer any polite contradiction. He took his place at the now immaculate desk and began to turn back his cuffs. He seemed to have forgotten 'Melia's presence. She stood apart, the soaking duster squeezed between her hands, her eyes wide, a little breath of colour in each sunken cheek. This was Henry—their Henry—their one pride and glory, the solitary and splendid star in their black firmament, far removed from them and yet theirs to gaze upon—Henry, who had been top of the seventh standard, who had won prizes, and made friends with fine

gentlemen, and finally had become a gentleman with a nobby overcoat and a bowler and a flower in his buttonhole. It gave 'Melia a queer sense of comfort and well-being just to look at him, as though she herself had suddenly become well-fed, well-clothed, prosperous and clean. Her small, famished heart grew big and hot with wonder and love and worship.

Henry looked at her at last. It was such a familiar look that it did not hurt her—impatient, uneasy, resentful. She knew that people wanted to hit her when they looked like that.

“What a dirty little ragamuffin you are. Half-starved too. Why don't you wash your face?”

“I do, 'Enry. But it ain't no good. It just comes again.”

“What comes again? You can't even speak English. It's disgusting. The way the lot of you have gone down hill makes me sick. What do you do with yourself all day?”

'Melia faltered, and the question baffled her. What did she do that was worth repeating to such a man?

“I dunno, 'Enry; not much. There's the twins, and Ma—Ma gets took bad mostly every day, and—and a bit of charin' now that I don't 'ave to go to school no more, and—and——”

A rare light of inspiration flooded the wizened, unchild-like face. “And then there's the pantomime, 'Enry!”

“What's that? What pantomime?”

“I dances—every evening—twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays. I'm sixth fairy. I've got a dress with green wings, and—and——” She stopped again. There was something in Henry's expression that choked her and wilted her frail joy. “Of course, they ain't real wings,” she explained anxiously.

Henry muttered to himself. The word "half-wit" did not reach her, and if it had she would have hardly understood.

"In heaven's name how old are you?" he asked.

"Fourteen, 'Enry—fourteen to-day."

"Good Lord! You might—you might be anything."

'Melia nodded. It was the sort of thing people said, and she knew that it was true. She knew that she was not like other children. She was different—all wrong.

"I wish you'd get something decent to do—something respectable," Henry observed sullenly. "Pantomime dancing's beastly."

"I ain't good for much," she explained. "Mother says so."

He brooded over this, his hands deep in his pockets, his face grown suddenly very red.

"Well, you can't come round here, Amelia. It won't do. I'm clerk to Jenkyns and Smythe, and I'm getting on well. I shall have a rise soon. But it'll dish me if anybody knew—well, that I had—that you were my sister, and that's the truth."

"No one don't need to know, 'Enry."

"You'd tell them."

"I wouldn't, honour bright."

"You'd call me Henry."

"No, I wouldn't—I wouldn't, really, 'Enry."

He relented a little, obviously relieved.

"Well, then, mind you don't. Get on with whatever you think you're doing here and clear out."

He pulled out a pile of papers and began to sort them with an air of profound preoccupation. But 'Melia lingered. She could not dust because everything she touched was left with a tell-tale smear, but also she could not go. She

watched the young man as a dog watches a beloved master, and presently he looked up at her. His expression had changed. He was smiling awkwardly, shyly, like an embarrassed boy.

“Come here, Amelia Alexandria-what’s-your-name.” She came like a flash, and he pulled a lock of the straggling hair. “You’re not a bad kid. Here, look at that. What do you think of her, eh?” He gave her the little piece of pasteboard with a repressed triumph which compared oddly with his previous hauteur. It made him seem younger and quite lovable. “Bit of all right, eh?”

‘Melia’s eyes and mouth grew round with wonder.

“She’s a lidy, ain’t she, ‘Enry? And ain’t she lovely—oh, ‘Enry—beautifuller even than Cinderella.”

He blushed, feigning good-natured indifference.

“Well, I don’t know about that. But she’s my girl. We’re going to get spliced when I’ve saved a bit. Don’t you tell——”

Masculine voices sounded outside in the passage, and he thrust the photo in his pocket.

“There, you cut now. Remember what you promised—you might spoil everything.” He was going to push her away, but his eyes met hers, and their wistful admiration and dumb appeal reached to some unknown, unexplored region of his heart. He kissed her gingerly on the cheek. “You’re a queer little freak. There—and p’raps I’ll bring Alice to see you dance—yes, I will really. And throw bouquets at you. And here’s sixpence. Buy yourself something to eat, you look as though you wanted——”

He broke off. The door had opened before a large and portly gentleman, and Henry busied himself among his papers. No one saw ‘Melia slip out. She was so small and quiet. She forgot Mrs. Pugmire and the tuppence and

the spoiled duster. She ran down the street, her little legs shaking under her, and the sixpence clenched tight in a hot and grimy hand.

IV

That night Amelia Alexandria Nobbs danced as she had never danced before. Dancing was her one accomplishment, and even that was not so much an accomplishment as a queer disability to control the caperings of her thin little legs, which seemed to have a personality of their own, and to fly away with her whenever the band struck up. In her fairy dress and make-up her wizened unyouthfulness became an elfish piquancy, and she was put in the first row at the far end where people never failed to notice her. Good-natured matrons with their excited offspring pointed her out delightedly.

"Isn't she clever? Such a queer, sweet, little mite. She can't be more than nine. I didn't know they were allowed to dance so young, but I expect they get a lot. And dancing's so healthy."

As a rule, 'Melia regarded the big theatre with a kind of fascinated terror. Though her small, tired brain could not reason about it, she was more conscious of the dust and dirt, the dark, narrow passages, the cursings and petty rages of the feverish inhabitants than of the lights and pretty clothes and gay music. The glitter did not dazzle her. It was not like the fire at daybreak, or like Henry. It was not real, or warm, or true. But to-night everything seemed different. Somewhere in that vast black gulf Henry might be seated—Henry and the kind-faced, beautiful being who was to be his wife. He was watching her. Perhaps he would be pleased. Perhaps even he might nudge his companion.

"You see that green fairy—the sixth in the first row—that's my sister."

She became so sure of it that when the conductor handed up a bouquet to a giggling and opulent-looking Cinderella she knew that there was some mistake, and smiled wistfully out into the darkness. And thereafter she danced more passionately than ever. Her legs surpassed themselves. They almost frightened her. She thought that they might go on for ever and ever. And her head felt so queer and light, as though it did not belong anywhere, but was floating about in the air, all by itself.

And whilst she danced, Mrs. Nobbs leant against the bar of the nearest public-house and told her tale.

“ And there was me, suffering somethink awful, and wot does the varmint do? Buys itself bull's-eyes and comes 'ome with a lot of bloomin' lies. But I told 'er orf, I did. She won't forget the clout I gave 'er in a 'urry. Ain't as though I weren't a good mother. Look at me, waitin' 'ere to fetch 'er when she's done gallivanting at the theyater. Ain't many as'd do it. Little good-fer-nothing!” She pushed her glass across the bar, and her husky voice grew suddenly clear and dominant. “ But you should see my son 'Enry.”

V

Winter gave place to summer.

After the duster episode, 'Melia worked no more at Jenkins and Smythe's. So she never knew why these two otherwise estimable gentlemen should be so addicted to swearing, and Henry became a dream. She dreamed of him in the laundry where she worked by day and in the third-rate music hall where at night she played a child's part in the tenth turn. She seemed, if anything, to have grown smaller. Her cheeks were colourless hollows; the little face tapered to a pointed, famished chin. But in her

"make-up" she was still "elfish," and her terrifying little legs ran away with her more recklessly than ever.

Then, one hot August, something happened. At first 'Melia did not know what it was. It was like a great noise which meant nothing. She tried to understand, but her brain was full of the stifling steam of the laundry, the counting of shirts, and the tum-tum-tum of the orchestra. It did not seem to cope with anything else.

But she noticed things. For instance, Mrs. Nobbs's "attacks" suddenly took a turn for the better. She disappeared early in the morning and came home grimly sober. Mr. Nobbs brought home money and talked strangely of strange things. They moved into a better street, and the twins slept in a bed.

Then, one night, from the corner where she slept, 'Melia heard Mr. Nobbs's voice raised in bitter grief and anger.

"We've been driven back again. It ain't their fault, the fine lads, but there ain't enough of 'em. We shall want every man we've got. Gawd! why won't they 'ave me?"

"And 'Enry—'ave you 'eard?"

"Don't you worry, mother." He gave a short exultant laugh. "He's gone with the best, you can bet your life on that. They'll make a bloomin' orficer of 'im before you can say Jack Robinson. They'll want men like 'im. He'll do 'is bit—our 'Enry." He broke off, and 'Melia knew that he was looking at her, and she knew the look. "Gawd! if only them twins were grown or we had another son instead o' that," he muttered.

They talked far into the night, and 'Melia lay with closed eyes, still as a mouse, and listened. And now she began to understand.

A great and terrible thing had come to the world. It was a thing of fire, and brazen sound, and splendid, terrible

colour. But she had no part—no share in it. It had no need of her, It needed everyone—even the twins—and, of course, Henry, but not Amelia Alexandria. It wouldn't have her at any cost.

Somehow or other it knew already that she was no good.

VI

Suddenly her unruly legs broke into a run. A minute before they had been so tired and wobbly that it seemed doubtful whether they would ever cover the distance between the laundry and home. And now they ran. A minute later they were marching—right-left, right-left, and 'Melia's head was up and her chest out. The man beside her smiled good-naturedly. The drums went rat-a-tat-tat, “Keep in step there, 'Melia!” and the pipes shrieked, “Hurrah, hurrah! we're coming! Clear the way there!” It was a wonderful, amazing change. It was as though the grey October twilight had caught fire. Everything—everybody looked different. The streets shone and the veriest loafer stepped out with a devil-may-care air. Even 'Melia had a dangerous look about her. The heavy cloud which had rested on her small head, growing heavier and blacker every day, and making it so difficult for her to understand, lifted. She seemed to have broken through into clear sunlight.

At the cross-roads they parted company. The regiment went swinging on into the dusk, and 'Melia turned slowly into her own street. Gradually the sound of the pipes faded in the distance, and her heart beat lower, and her legs grew tired and wobbly and discouraged, as they did when the orchestra released them from its pitiless spell. By the time she had toiled to the top of the narrow wooden stairs of their home everything was dark and still and grey. And yet it was not quite as it had been. She felt shaken and

bewildered, as though she had seen a light whose after-glow showed faintly on the gathering clouds.

She opened the door of the one room, which, in spite of better days, they still occupied. It was all dark and quiet. Mr. and Mrs. Nobbs were both on what they called "night-shift," and the twins had been given into the care of a kindly neighbour. But even on the threshold 'Melia felt that there was something hidden in the darkness—something that had moved as she entered and now crouched motionless, watching her. She herself stood stock still, frozen with terror, until the sudden creak of a chair drove a little whistling breath between her clenched teeth. A man's figure shot up between her and the pale lightness of the window.

"Amelia, is that you? Don't cry out now, for heaven's sake. It's all right. It's me—Henry."

She did not answer. She heard him fumbling with matches, and presently by a flickering candle-light she saw him. He wore the same fine coat, and yet somehow it was fine no longer. And he was different. Or, perhaps, the poverty of the room threw its shadow over him, making him look thin and hunted and dishevelled. He stood there, trying to smile at her, and then it was as though a wire that held his face had snapped, letting his features fall into grotesque, pitiful lines. He turned away, tumbling into the chair by the empty grate, and the room was full of the terrible sound of a man crying.

In that moment Amelia Alexandria grew up. The shock of the incredible thing lifted her right out of the twilight in which she lived. She ran to him, pulling his hands from his face, calling to him, rubbing her sunken, grubby cheek against his wet one in inarticulate anguish and pity.

"Oh, 'Enry, don't you tike on like that! Don't you cry

—please don't cry, 'Enry. You ain't got no call to cry. It'll be orl right. I'll make it orl right for you, I will, honour bright.”

He clung to her—that was the most incredible thing of all—he clung to her as though to the one sure, strong thing in a tottering universe. His head rested on her inadequate little shoulder, his trembling shook her as a storm shakes a frail young sapling. And she held him with an immense, sublimely confident power to save and comfort that came to her in his need. “Don't cry, 'Enry. Don't cry!”

He looked up at last, and in the sickly light his face showed wet and twisted and wry, like a broken-hearted child's.

“I—I'm not crying. I've had an awful time; I didn't know what to do. I—I've been prowling about; I didn't know where to go. I thought of chucking myself in the river. Where are they? Where's mother, and—and——”

“They're both out—workin'. They won't be back till mornin'.”

His hands dropped limply from their desperate hold.

“I—I can wait a bit, then. I couldn't face them—they wouldn't understand. They've got ideas—about me. I only came because there was no one else—like a hunted rat——” He broke off, his teeth chattering. “Lord, how cold it is!”

She said nothing, but she began to lay the fire, and presently set the kettle over the smoky flame. She was outwardly just as usual—quiet and solemn—but inside her heart was beating with a sick fear. She could not think clearly, but she knew that something evil had laid its knife at the roots of the one thing that had grown straight and fine in their sunless, arid garden, their one little bit of glory and vision which they had clung to so stubbornly. From

where she crouched on the fender she watched him, and under that dumb, anxious gaze he grew restless, and his laden, red-rimmed eyes met hers at last with a piteous resentment.

"What are you staring at? D'you think I'm a circus?"

"Oh, no, 'Enry."

"Don't do it. I can't stick it. I might be a god—a blessed tin god—and—and I'm all in—done for—broke—gone to blazes." He began to laugh hysterically, and he laughed till he buried his face in his shaking hands. She crept up to him and touched him tentatively like a timid, loving animal.

"Wot's up, 'Enry?"

"Money. You wouldn't understand."

"Yus, I would. I'd try to. I knows lots about money."

He looked at her dully. And suddenly he began—it was like the bursting of a pent-up torrent. He did not know whether she understood or not. The burden of it all had become too great. He was young, and as the faltering sentences fell from his lips they seemed to carry with them all his conceits and absurdities and leave the boy quivering and raw and broken.

"At first it was only a little—just a shilling or two—and when I won I paid it back—honest—and then a chap gave me a tip—a dead cert—and I borrowed—and lost. Then I had to get it back—I had to—but the brute went lame, and—and they've begun to suspect. I wanted to pay back out of my screw, but I haven't had time. They're going over my books to-morrow—they're hard men. If I can't square things it means quod, and there's Alice—no end proud. I know what she's thinking all the time. Why don't I join up and do my bit? And I would—I'd make good—but I can't now. I shan't have the chance."

She stood very straight.

“You’ll ’ave to go, ’Enry. We ain’t got enuf men. They—they’ve got to ’ave fellows like you, Dad says. They want you bad.”

He laughed bitterly.

“They’ll want me all right.”

“Is—is it an awful lot of money?”

“Five quid. It might as well be five thousand.”

She was looking away from him, and the firelight in her eyes lent them an odd, elfish brightness.

“I’ve got five pounds, ’Enry.”

“You? Go on!” He jeered savagely. “Don’t tell lies.”

“I ’ave. I saved it.” She spoke very slowly and carefully. “Mother don’t know. I kept it dark. I earn a lot at the ’all—’cause I can dance. I ain’t got it ’ere. I keeps it with a friend. Five pounds it is.”

He sprang up with a stifled oath.

“If that’s true—if you’d only lend it me—you don’t know what it means. I can’t believe it, you queer little freak.”

She had picked up the shabby hat from the floor where it had fallen.

“I gotter go now, ’Enry. There’s the ’all at seven. I’ll bring it when I comes back. You stay ’ere. No one’ll know. It’ll be orl right now.”

He nodded, but he did not really hear what she had said—he was not thinking of her. His eyes shone, and he held himself with his old jauntiness. From the doorway she looked back at him. There was a world of unshaken love and wonder in that look, but he did not see it. He was thinking of all that life still held for him, and she turned and went on down the dark stairs.

The recruiting band was on its way home. Amelia Alexandria met it at the bottom of the street and marched with it to the rat-a-tat-tat of drums, and her head was up and her narrow chest thrown out. A newly-won soldier glanced down at her, and in the lamplight her small face looked so set and earnest that he laughed.

"Going to join up, eh?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no; wouldn't 'ave me. I ain't no good." Her shrill, little voice grew strong with a sudden joyous pride. "But I've got a big brother. 'E's going for a soldier to-morrow—'Enry is."

"Fine chap, your big brother!"

"Yus," she said simply. "'E's fine."

"I reckon you'd do your bit if you could, eh?"

The brave blare of the trumpets drowned her answer. Tears coming from she didn't know where burned in Amelia Alexandria's eyes, her grubby fists were clenched tight, and her heart grew big and hot.

For almost it seemed as though the great Thing had caught her up into itself, as though even she belonged a little——

VII

The producer of the skit, "The Seven Chits," did not appear to hear, and when she said it all over again, a little louder and with a desperate quaver in her voice, he stared through a cloud of cigar smoke and laughed crossly.

"Five pounds advance? Rubbish! What next? No; certainly not! Ridiculous! The brat's mad! Chances are the show'll close down next week. Off with you!"

She held her ground. But there was nothing heroic or pathetic about her just then, nothing to touch the heart.

Her sharp little nose was red, her cheeks were white under the grime, and she had a stupid, sullen look.

“I gotter 'ave it,” she persisted dully. “I gotter——”

The producer arose majestically from his chair. Only on the stage or between the covers of a novel are want and disease really appealing. The average well-fed human being shrinks from their genuine manifestations as from something repulsive, and the producer was distinctly well-fed. He took Amelia Alexandria by the shoulder and propelled her out of the room and slammed the door viciously.

“Cheeky brat !”

The corridor was empty and in half darkness. The usual confusion and hubbub had momentarily died down, for it was the star turn, and every one who could, even to the blasé call-boy, had slipped away to the wings. In the solemn hush Amelia Alexandria heard a big, booming, woman's voice and the martial rumble of the orchestra.

“Come on, lads ! We want the lot of you.”

It was Flossie Montmorency singing her great recruiting song.

Amelia shuffled slowly along the passage. She was crying quietly, monotonously. She was no good. Just for that one moment the chance had been in her hands. The Great Thing had looked at her and beckoned, “Come on, 'Melia ! Now then, do your bit !” But now it was all gone. She was outside it all—the cheering and the singing and the giving were not for her. And there was Henry—their Henry whom England needed so badly—waiting.

A door stood open, letting out a yellow flood of light into the sombre passage. 'Melia Alexandria stood still. At first she was only fascinated, dazzled into forgetfulness, and then it was as though a shuttered window in her mind had been burst open,

"Come on, lads! We want the lot——"

Apparently, Miss Montmorency suffered from the weakness of genius and a careless dresser. Her fur coat was on the floor, her dress had been flung anyhow over a chair; there were shoes, stockings, hats everywhere. And on the table, glittering under the white electric glare were silver brushes, bangles, rings—a gold bag.

Just for one instant Amelia waited. Then she went forward. She took no precautions. She did not look about her or listen. She was in the power of something bigger than herself—bigger than fear.

There were seven pound notes crumpled up in the gold bag. She counted out five with red-knuckled, shaking fingers. Right and wrong were only vague phantoms to Amelia Alexandria. She only knew of punishment and reward. She had to choose between them—no, simpler than that—between herself and Henry—between nothing and everything.

She turned suddenly. A figure had loomed up in the open doorway—a portly, dumbfounded figure. In the distance Miss Montmorency's hefty contralto vaulted the high "E" amidst tumultuous applause. Just for an instant the two stared at each other. And then a strange thing happened. 'Melia, the timid, the cowed, the broken, gathered herself together like some wild thing of the forests. She made no sound. She flung herself at the enemy—a tiger-cat springing in the face of an unwieldy, puzzled elephant—and the elephant stepped back, and the way was open.

Amelia Alexandria fled. For the last time the amazing incalculable legs answered to the call—carrying her to victory . . .

Henry Nobbs waited for her at the head of the stairs. He took the paper money from her clenched hand and

counted it in the dark. She was leaning against the wall and he could not see her. He did not know that she could hardly stand. She hushed the agonised, panting lungs with the last effort of her will.

But a minute later he picked her up. He kissed her on both clammy cheeks.

“You’ve done it, ’Melia. You saved me. You’re the best little sister a fellow ever had. And I’ll pay you back. I’ll fight like ten men just to make you proud of me again. I’ll bring you back something fine.” He laughed out joyously. “Perhaps a German helmet.”

And then he kissed her again and set her down, and a moment later was gone.

Amelia Alexandria listened to his retreating steps. She heard his cheery, farewell shout. Then the cloud which had lifted for so long from her tired, bewildered brain, rolled back again, shutting out the thought of him. The amazing legs gave way suddenly and completely. It grew very dark—darker than night.

They found her there when they came to look for her, lying in a little unconscious heap half-way up the stairs.

VIII

After that life resolved itself into a series of pictures for Amelia Alexandria. It was like sitting in a picture-palace. A film would be thrown on the screen showing strange places and strange people, and then everything would fade into darkness, and after a while another scene would come along. Amelia supposed it all meant something, but she wasn’t sure.

One scene showed up clearer than the rest. It represented a big, glass-domed room, lined with benches, on which a swarm of solemn, black-coated gentry bobbed up

and down with a tremendous enthusiasm. And extra large policemen, looking somehow as though they were in church and quite human kept order. 'Melia had never seen a policeman without his helmet, and the phenomenon filled her with awe and helped to keep her awake. For there was a musty-fusty, sleepy smell about the place, and the light, dim and foggy, seemed to have been in prison all its life and to have lost heart.

Opposite 'Melia, on a bench higher than the rest and barricaded by a sinister-looking desk, sat an old, old man. He was quite alone. He looked at 'Melia and 'Melia looked at him. She had a dim idea that there was some sort of relationship between them. They had set her on a tall stool so that she could see him better over the bars. And she, too, was all alone.

There was only one familiar face among the many. In a queer, box-shaped structure like a pulpit stood Miss Florence Montmorency, and, with tossing plumes and jangling jewels, gave her opinion to the world. In vain the old man tried to stem the torrent, it caught his protest like a straw and flung it aside.

"It's a shame, your Worship, a downright, blinking shame! If I'd known it was that poor, little, half-starved brat I wouldn't have said a word. What's five quid to me, anyhow? I said I didn't want to prosecute. I told that silly mug of a bobby I wouldn't, and what's more I won't."

She paused for breath, and the old man leant forward.

"Did you take the five pounds?" he asked in his tired, far-away voice.

"Say you didn't!" urged Miss Montmorency. "I'll back you! Don't let yourself be bullied, kiddo!"

"Yus," said 'Melia drowsily. "I took it."

"For food?"

“Yus.”

“And quite right too! A jolly good thing. I'd have done it myself——”

Somehow or other Miss Montmorency was whisked out of the picture, and in her place Mrs. Nobbs loomed up, red-faced with wrath and righteous indignation and other things.

“'Tain't as though I 'adn't been a good mother. Slaved my life away for the ungrateful brat, I 'ave, and orl she does is to bring shame on me grey hairs. Never was no good—not to anybody.” Mrs. Nobbs began to sniff. “If it wasn't for me son 'Enry wot's gone to serve 'is King and Country——”

She faded. A murmur of voices. Here and there a word rose up out of the dimness and confusion like a fish flashing to the surface of a pond. “Starved, malnutrition, not responsible, wasting, not long——”

The old man and the child looked at each other as though there were some secret bond between them.

“You must try to be a good girl, Amelia.”

Someone lifted her gently from her perch. But now there was no orchestra, no jolly marching band to call them to their duty, and the legs wobbled and gave way. One of the extra big policemen loomed over her. She saw his round, red face—it seemed to blot out everything else—and she was filled with wonder.

It had never occurred to her that policemen cried.

The black-coated, solemn-looking folk whispered together. The old man bent over his papers. A shrill voice rose up from somewhere in the background.

“'Ardened little monkey! Gawd knows where she got it from—not me, any'ow. Poor, but honest, that's wot we are. And there's 'Enry, chucked 'is job to do 'is bit.

Gawd be thanked 'e need never know; it'd break 'is 'eart, poor chap—a sister like that. Wot's that? Well, ain't I goin' quiet?"

The voice faded into the distance.

IX

The nurse paused with her hand on the half-opened door and looked back over her shoulder. She had flushed up suddenly and her lips were not quite steady.

"She will be so happy," she said. "She is always talking of you. We read her the bits out of the papers, and—and she was so proud." As she spoke her eyes sank to the level of the patch of purple ribbon on his left breast. She was thinking how strange it was that 'Melia Alexandria should have such a brother, and of the many wonderful things that war brings in its train. So she did not see the young man's face.

"I would have come before. I didn't know, they never told me. They wanted to keep it from me."

The nurse understood that quite well. A hero and a common little street girl who stole! But her heart was tender.

"You mustn't be hard on her. She has had a bad time, and I don't think she quite understood, and—and I'm afraid it won't be for long now."

The young man laughed. It was a very ugly little laugh, the kind that comes from someone who is badly hurt.

"No; I shan't be hard."

It was a big room and 'Melia slept in a far corner by the window, and a screen guarded her from her companions. The other children would grow quiet when they looked at the screen. It seemed to frighten them.

But behind it there was only Amelia Alexandria, and she

was so small. She seemed to have grown smaller and to be part of the whiteness of the little white bed. Her dark head was like a faded flower whose stem has been broken.

She was asleep, but when he knelt down beside her she opened her eyes and smiled at him as though he had been with her all the time.

“'Allo, 'Enry!”

He tried to speak. All the things that he had meant to say slipped away from him. Something there was about Amelia Alexandria which made him feel helpless and young and foolish. She had grown up—she had grown wise—she was looking at him and at life from a serene height. And suddenly he was the child who needed comforting. He hid his face in his hands, and she put a thin arm about him, holding him close.

“Don't you take on, 'Enry. I'm orl right. You wasn't to know nothink—no one was to know.”

“They're going to know now. I'm going to get you out of here. You're coming home with me. I'm married. I've told Alice. I'm going to tell everyone.”

“Wot cher goin' to tell them?”

“What you did. What I am.”

She smiled vaguely, wistfully.

“I likes being 'ere, 'Enry. They're that good to me. I gets things to eat, and I lie 'ere all day, like a princess, and sometimes Miss Flossie comes and brings me choc'lates.” Her thin voice grew clear and joyous. “And she tells me about you, 'Enry; 'ow you took the trench and all them Germans. I likes that best. But I don't say nothink—I promised you I wouldn't—you a real live horficer and me—It 'd spoil everything if they knew.”

“Don't, 'Melia, for God's sake!”

“My, ain't cher fine, 'Enry! A real man! I like that

better than the coat with skirts ; and then, the bit o' ribbon." She passed her ghostly hands over him as though to make sure of his reality. "The King gave you that, didn't 'e?"

"Yes, yes ; perhaps he wouldn't have if he had known. He's going to know now. 'Melia, why did you do it? It wasn't right—I wasn't worth it. Why did you do it, 'Melia?"

She tried to answer. The little flame of life that had sprung up for a last time was burning very low. Her head rested wearily against his shoulder.

"Don't you tell, 'Enry."

"I must. I've got to get you out of here."

"I don't want to. I likes it. Things to eat and no twins. 'Enry, if you tells them it's all been no good, then I ain't done nothink. I was that 'appy. You gotter promise."

"I can't. I'm blackguard enough."

"You ain't, you—you're an 'ero. The King said so. My, ain't it getting dark, though?"

"Is it? Yes, perhaps——"

"Tell me about them trenches, 'Enry. Was there a band playin'?"

"No, no band."

"There was a band—that night. I likes bands—'elps you to do things. A soldier, 'e said ; 'You'd do your bit, too, if you could, wouldn't cher, 'Melia?' 'E seemed sort of to know I was going to 'ave a chance."

"A chance! What chance?"

"'Melia ain't no good for nothink ; Dad said."

He was beginning to understand. It was as though he had caught a glimpse of a small, tired soul that had struggled its way up out of a sordid gloom into the light. He held her close, desperately close.

“It’s going to be alright now, ‘Melia.”

“You won’t tell, ‘Enry?”

“No, not if you don’t want it.”

“Then—p’raps—I’ll ‘ave done somethin’—after all——”

“Yes, something fine; the bravest thing——”

Her smile was a little scornful.

“Tell me about them trenches, ‘Enry.”

He drew a deep unsteady breath. But he spoke with a ringing clearness. She was slipping from him, but before she went she was to know what she had won.

“They were enfilading our men—shooting them down from the side, like this—and two other chaps and I went for them. There was only one gun—a machine gun—but they bowled over the other two before we got near, and then—then I just bombed them out.”

“How fine! Wot cher cryin’ for, ‘Enry.”

“I’m not crying. Then the King gave me this medal. And he said: ‘You take this along to your sister Amelia Alexandria, and give it to her with my love. For she’s made a man of you, and she’s done her bit with the bravest of them all.’”

“G’arn!”

“So it’s yours, ‘Melia, you won it; it’s your very own. Can you read? It’s got ‘For Valour’ written on it.”

“Wot’s—wot’s valour?”

“What you’re made of.”

Her hand closed tight over the simple bronze cross. Her face was radiant, but her eyes had a blank unseeing look.

“Ain’t it dark? Must be gettin’ on for night. I think I could sleep a bit now, ‘Enry. I’m that ‘appy.”

He stayed with her, her head on his shoulder, but she did not wake again. She slept on all through the night, and when they came to her in the first flush of the morning she

was still sleeping. Her small face had a look of such ineffable content that the children were allowed to peep at her. And after that they were not afraid or sorry any more.

They knew there was no need.

IX

A GIFT FOR ST. NICHOLAS

I

To the little Nicholas the Big Nicholas was above all things a person who loved candles. It was in vain that one expounded doctrine on the subject. Little Nicholas, who had a way of listening with a misleading politeness, knew better than all the wise people in the world. Even the curé, for whom he had otherwise the greatest respect, could not shake his belief in his own opinion.

Little Nicholas knew because he sympathised. He liked candles himself. They were the tall straight little people who chased away nightmare bogies and uncanny shadows. They helped one up the dark wooden stairs to bed, and when one lay watching drowsy-eyed, their golden flames danced with the night wind that came in, mysterious and laughing, through the open window.

But they were most wonderful of all when one gave them to St. Nicholas. Then they behaved themselves. They stood round the feet of the sweet-faced saint like a bevy of white-robed, golden-haired choristers at High Mass. Their flames burnt up very straight and solemn. They held the shadows sternly at bay, cutting a big hole in the darkness of the side altar, and they filled the saint's face with kindly

warmth. St. Nicholas stood in the midst of them and prayed for all those who were in sorrow, and more especially for little Nicholas, who was his name child. When the candles burnt themselves out the Saint's face grew grey and still and dead. Then Little Nicholas knew that he hadn't the heart to pray for anybody any more. So every day before school Little Nicholas brought two candles and set them up in their place and watched till their light had gathered to their full strength. And then he knew that all day long his patron saint was praying that Little Nicholas should get through his Arithmetic without disaster and, incidentally, that he should be good.

From the results one can only suppose that there are a great many other Nicholases in like trouble, and that the saint was sometimes too overworked to give little Nicholas his best attention.

Little Nicholas lived with his father and mother in the most important house in the town. For the Latours were important people though they were not rich, even as riches went in that part of the world. But they were "old" people—not upstarts like the Dandens who had speculated and grown important in a day. They had always been important; they had always owned the best part of the land and held official posts and worn ribbons in their button-holes.

Besides all this, Charles Latour was handsome and tall, with black hair and a pointed black beard that gave him a look of splendid daring. Though he could be gay and light-hearted and make his joke with the best, yet when the moment came for action he was stern and relentless. He never shut his eyes to a weakness, he ripped disguise from dishonesty and inefficiency with a just hand. And in spite of this he

won love as easily as he breathed. People said there was no malice in his justice. "He would do the same to himself," they declared, "if ever he fell below his own standards."

But he never did. His own life was immaculate.

Little Nicholas worshipped his father as older and wiser people worship God. He liked to say to strangers ; "*My father is Monsieur Latour*". He liked to see them pull an earnest face and hear them say, "Ah, yes, Monsieur Latour ? We know his name well." He liked to see his school-fellows pull off their caps in shy awe when his father came to fetch him. He liked to walk out of the school gates, his small hand clasped in the strong big one, and to feel envious eyes follow him down the street.

Those were the happiest moments in his life.

Then there was his mother. The people said she was the loveliest woman in all the *sous-préfecture*, and Little Nicholas was sure it was true. On Sundays when they went to High Mass in the shining white parish church everyone smiled at the three Latours, not just in greeting, but in the sheer pleasure of seeing them because they were so good to look on.

"Comme ils sont bien, ces trois !" the men would say.

"Comme ils sont heureux !" murmured the women.

Marianne Latour was fair and slight, with blue eyes that were full of shyness and reserve. But when she looked at her husband their colour deepened, and they became tender and very proud and a little wistful. It was as though she could not see him without wondering at her own happiness.

Little Nicholas loved his mother. She was very near to him—he never had to explain things to her. She would always understand, and her quiet reassuring smile was like

the candle-light when the darkness frightened him. They were one with one another. But she was not like his father. She was not an ideal. He did not think to himself, "When I am grown up I will be like her—tender and good and beautiful". He thought, "I will be brave and strong and respected like my father".

There was some one else whom Little Nicholas loved. This was Louis Latour, his father's elder brother. And here, again, was a different kind of love, afraid, pitying, and mingled with childish condescension. For Louis was hunchbacked and ugly, with long arms like an ape and with an ape's strength. Little Nicholas loved him because he could make wonderful toys with his ungainly hands, and despised him because he was hunchbacked, and feared him—he didn't know why.

Louis Latour was manager of the branch bank at the bottom of the street. He was a shrewd business man and, unlike the rest of his race, had amassed money. And yet every one knew that he had failed in all his ambitions.

He had loved Marianne, and she had chosen his brother. He had sought office, and it was Charles who was made Maire. He was almost servile in his desire for the love of Marianne's child, and yet one day—when St. Nicholas was not paying particular attention—the boy had joined his comrades in cruel mockery of the misshapen figure.

Afterwards Little Nicholas was ashamed and wept bitterly and asked pardon. But Louis Latour had never forgotten.

On the day that Charles received the insignia of office he gave a feast to all his friends. He could not very well afford it, for the lands had been doing badly, but in his gay, splendid mood he wanted to share his triumph with all man-

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kind. It was just for such human qualities that men loved him.

II

The old clerk glanced at the clock and closed his ledger with a sigh.

"It is time, monsieur," he said.

The habitual answer came from the inner office where the manager sat in state.

"It is well, Simon."

Louis Latour stood up. He was in evening dress, for he knew that he would not have time to go home and change. All the afternoon he had worn his overcoat so that his customers should not see his unusual grandeur. Now he glanced at himself shyly in the full-length glass. Standing like that in the half-light, comparing himself with no one, he looked well enough. His hand rested magisterially on the desk, and its abnormal length was hidden. One did not see the deformed back at all. It was just as though he were bending forward a little, his dark sombre face almost handsome. Yes, almost handsome. Then he saw Charles standing beside him—a tall upright shadow, and he dwindled and grew hideous. He turned a little on one side, and the illusion of his straightness was wholly gone. Also the evening clothes were ridiculous. They did not fit him—it was not possible that they should—and they had a faded rusty look. In truth one did not wear evening clothes often in that part of the world. For months they had lain in tissue paper in the bottom drawer. The last time he had worn them was at the christening of the Little Nicholas.

Louis Latour drew his breath sharply between his teeth.

"I shan't cut much of a figure," he thought with bitter amusement. "I'm lucky when no one notices me."

Standing there in the twilight, the white shirt front gleaming at him from out of the shadowy glass, he imagined how it would be if for once people would look at him gravely, respectfully, without that lurking tolerance and pity. He imagined himself towering up among them—not in body perhaps, but in sheer strength of mind and soul. They saw for the first time how big and strong he was, and he looked over their heads and met Marianne's eyes. They were grave and full of appeal and sorrow. It was as though she said, "Forgive me, Louis, I did not know." And she held Little Nicholas in her arms, and he, too, was awestruck—the Little Nicholas who had made fun——

"I have put up the shutters, monsieur," said the old clerk in his tired voice.

"Very well, Simon," the manager answered.

He took up his old-fashioned top-hat, fastened up his coat, and came out of his private room. The public doors of the bank were already closed, and the night-watchman hung up his lantern on the wall. Latour nodded to him. He was still thinking of himself, standing in the midst of a hushed, reverent crowd.

"You will be very proud to-night, monsieur," the old clerk said, as he moved to and fro, locking up the desks. "It is a happy occasion for all of us——"

Latour lifted his brows absently. "Yes."

"Monsieur Charles is the most popular Maire the town has ever had," the clerk added.

His key jangled a soft applause.

"Yes," Latour repeated in a different tone.

"These are dangerous times, monsieur. We need strong, brave men. Monsieur Charles is the right man in the right place. And his lovely wife——! Ah, yes, we shall be very proud——"

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Latour opened the side-door with his private key. The dusk met him with hot dusty breath. The street was almost empty. Only here and there a figure slipped past under the lamp-light like a fish in a deep sunlit pool.

The watchman yawned and then stretched himself.

"Good-night, monsieur."

"Good-night."

Just then the telephone buzzed angrily. Latour lingered for a moment. He heard Simon take down the receiver, but he was not really interested. He simply did not want to go on. He did not want to see Charles standing there in the midst of his friends—radiant and successful and happy. He did not want to know when he passed that people nudged each other and whispered.

"Fancy—his brother! Queer how things go! Poor devil!"

He wanted to go on with his own dreams. He had dreamed so much of late that his dreams had an intoxicating reality——

"Monsieur—it is from Paris—the president of the bank—he asks for you——"

Latour came back. He took the receiver from the clerk's shaking hands. It was grotesquely like the beginnings of those dreams of his. It made him dizzy and confused, so that for a moment he did not understand what the thin distant voice was saying. The watchman's lantern threw its pale light upon him from the wall. It made him the central figure. The two other men were just shadows—motionless and watchful. They had forgotten Charles. When the president of the Paris bank rang up a little provincial branch it meant that something had happened.

Latour hung up the receiver. His answers had been monosyllabic, conveying nothing. His lips were pressed into a tight line. But they saw that his hand shook.

"Yes—it is serious," he said, as though they had spoken. "I must go straight to the Maire—you had better come too, Simon. You will be welcome——"

He went out quickly without waiting for an answer. At first he almost ran. He left old Simon far behind him. The stragglers outside the estaminet doors glanced round curiously as he passed. He felt their eyes. But they did not hurt. He had something new with which he could, if he chose, strike their good-humoured, pitying stare dead. He held them all in the hollow of his hand. They would listen to him gravely enough if he chose to speak. For he carried their death-sentence.

As he came in sight of the lights of the big house he steadied his pace. He must not arrive breathless and confused. He must not show the elation which shook him. He must bear himself as became the magnitude of his errand. He saw himself standing on the threshold of Charles's big room, hat in hand, his coat falling open showing the white shirt front. He saw the dancers stand still—arrested as by the suddenly fallen hand of fate into grotesque attitudes—staring at him.

"Mesdames et messieurs," he would begin sonorously.

The door of the big house stood open. No one hindered him. But the music was not playing. The passages were empty. There was a curious tense stillness broken by Charles's voice.

Latour nodded to himself. He saw the whole thing. Charles would be returning thanks. Then *he* would enter and they would face each other, and in a moment the big, bearded, jolly fellow, would cease to matter—the little honour that he had won would be like a child's bauble.

He pushed open the door. Yes—there it all was as he had seen it. The plush furniture had been pushed to one side

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for the dancers. The musicians stood huddled in a corner. The guests themselves, in their unaccustomed finery, were grouped about that tall central figure, motionless, with blank, white faces.

"Mesdames and messieurs——"

His voice was not sonorous at all. It was thin and weak. Strange that he had forgotten. No one turned. No one noticed that he had even come in. Charles's voice rang out strong and vibrant.

"——we were prepared to live and let live—to forget, to strive only with one another in ways of peace. Well, they have chosen otherwise, and what they have chosen they shall receive. It is to the death. So be it. We stand firm. We shall die, but we shall conquer. *Vive la France!*"

There was an instant's silence. The answering cry was too big. It stuck fast in the throat. At last it burst through with the roar of a released torrent. The musicians scraped their violins with shaking bows.

"*Marchons, enfants de la Patrie!*"

The lips of men and women quivered like children's. They cried and did not know that they were crying. Some one who stood near to Latour turned to him with unseeing eyes.

"We have just heard," he stammered, "they have invaded Belgium. We shall fight——"

"I know," said Latour, "I knew some time ago. The president of the bank telephoned to me. I have had instructions."

But the man was not listening. Latour's glance wandered across the room to Marianne's face. She was pale and still, and her eyes were on her husband, and though he stood so far off Latour saw how proud they were. In that quiet, restrained woman pride was like a steady consuming fire,

He turned and went into the ante-room. A long table almost hidden with food, had been pushed up against the wall, and a hired waiter and the old family servant moved anxiously up and down before it like generals on an inspection. As she caught sight of Latour the old woman clapped her hands.

"Ah, Monsieur Louis, what a night. What news? At first when Monsieur Charles read out the telegram I thought I should faint. But he was so strong, so brave. He made one burn with courage. One wanted to go out and fight with one's old hands. Ah, yes, it is good for us that we have Monsieur Charles to help us in these days."

Latour shrugged his misshapen shoulders. He held out his glass and drank greedily of the wine which she poured out for him. It was a hot night, and he refilled his glass time after time, nodding his head to her anxious chatter, his eyes fixed on the floor. Presently the singing ceased. Excited groups of men and women drifted in through the curtained doorway, and some of them spoke to Latour, but hurriedly and carelessly as though they hardly knew who he was.

"You heard? It was magnificent. It was a bad moment, but he carried every one with him. The right word, the right note, the born rhetorician, a born leader——"

"We shall need leaders."

"One of these days we shall hear him in the Chamber."

Latour nodded to all this just as he had nodded to the old woman's talk. They did not notice him when he slipped out of the room. He met no one on the narrow, dimly-lit stairs. But on the first landing a door stood open.

"Nicholas," Latour said gently. "Little Nicholas."

His whole face had changed. He was smiling with a propitiatory eagerness—with a grotesque wistfulness. Little Nicholas, on hand and knees, his fair round head jammed

between the banisters in a despairing effort to see below into the lighted hall, paid no heed to him. The night-shirt and the night-light which twinkled like a star through the open doorway, proved that the patron saint had closed a lenient and understanding eye. Latour bent down and put his arm round the small shaking body.

"Nicholas, I've got something for you—I stole them when Jeanette wasn't looking—chocolates."

"I don't want chocolates."

Latour held the largest, finest offering in the palm of his hand. But little Nicholas had not so much as looked at it, and the man's face flushed a dull red.

"It's so stupid downstairs—all those big-wigs talking their heads off. Supposing I carry you back to bed and tell you a story?"

"I don't want stories. I want to listen. I want to see my father."

"Pooh! You can see him any time."

"I want to see him now. He's going to fight the bad people. Every one cheered him. '*Vive notre Maire! Vive Latour!*' He's my father. He's the bravest man in the world."

"Words aren't deeds," the man said huskily.

Little Nicholas did not understand. But he freed himself impatiently, scornfully, from the compelling arm.

"There, they are cheering again: '*Vive Latour!—Vive mon père!*'"

The shrill voice rang out like a silver bell over the dull clamour. Latour bent down and caught Little Nicholas in his arms. His face was livid now, ugly with passion.

"You silly little fool! You ought to be in bed. I shall tell your mother and she will punish you. I shall carry you back now."

"Let me go! Let me go!"

Latour did not answer. He was beside himself with a grotesque rage that had been gathering in his blood all that day, and now came to a head like a poisonous abscess. He held the small body in his long, powerful arms. He laughed at the tiny fists which struck him in the face. He was smashing the one thing that he cared for—as men, maddened by pain, tear at their own wounds.

"I hate you! I hate you!"

Latour laid his burden on the tumbled bed and drew the clothes into place. In silence they fought each other, not less frantically and desperately, because the man was using the hundredth part of his strength. At last Little Nicholas lay still. He was crying now with long-drawn shuddering sobs of defeat. And then Latour knelt down beside him. He drew the unresisting child into his arms and soothed him with an incoherent, desperate tenderness.

"Little Nicholas, I am sorry. I didn't mean it. You mustn't hate me. You mustn't. I was unkind, but I have had a hard day, you see, I have been terribly tried. I lost my temper. *Voyons*, I am crying too."

Little Nicholas lay passive, his arms limp at his side, his face averted. "You must forgive your poor old uncle," pleaded Latour with an agonised lightness. "See I will do anything to make up, little one. What do you want? Shall I fetch your father? Shall I tell you a story I have never told you before? It is about your father—when he and I were boys."

Suddenly Little Nicholas ceased to cry. He sat up thrusting the hunchback from him with the strength of contemptuous indifference, and held out his arms. The door had opened, and Marianne Latour stood on the threshold. She shaded a candle with a hand as delicate and

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transparent as alabaster, and the light threw up a quiet radiance on the fair oval of her face.

"I thought I heard something," she began. "I thought I heard Nicholas crying. I did not know you were here, Louis."

He scrambled up from his knees on to the edge of the bed. It was an uncouth, clumsy movement, and his laugh was ugly with the knowledge of it.

"I came up to say good-night," he stammered thickly, "and found Nicky on the landing shouting and cheering. I carried him back to bed. He was angry with me. But I was afraid he would take cold."

It was not true and somehow, though she could not have seen into the black turbulence of his motive, she knew it was not true. She laid a gentle hand on her son's head.

"It was natural that he should want to hear and see," she said. "It was a great moment for him to remember."

"It was a great moment for every Frenchman," he answered significantly.

Little Nicholas pressed himself against his mother's side. He looked at Latour with a childish triumph.

"My father is going to beat the bad people," he said; "and one day I shall beat them. To-morrow I shall ask Saint Nicholas to help me grow up quick so that I can fight too."

Marianne Latour shook her head.

"Pray God that there may be no need in your day, my little son," she said.

There was a silence. She stood quite close to Latour. She wore roses in the belt of her simple dress, and their sweetness drifted against his face. He had drunk heavily, but the intoxication which rose suddenly in his blood sprang from a deeper source.

"Marianne," he said scarcely audibly, "there are tears on your cheeks."

"I am crying for all those who are about to die," she answered, "and because I am so proud. I thank God that I married a man."

"I also am a man," Latour whispered.

They looked at him over the pointed flame of the candle. The boy's eyes were full of an instinctive horror. But his mother's face was grave and serene and gentle. Latour bent forward. He had said nothing—and he had said everything. With one look—with one word it had been done. It had leapt out from him like some wild beast that has lain patient and quiet waiting for the moment when the keeper's back is turned.

"Marianne!" he muttered, "Marianne!"

He caught her hand. He kissed it. She withdrew it from his mad grasp with a quiet irresistible strength.

"You are shaken, Louis," she said simply. "The excitement has been too much. Let us say good-night."

He stared at her, and they watched him—waiting; and he got up at last and stumbled blindly from the room.

III

After that Louis Latour came less often to the big house, and he did not play with Little Nicholas any more. They had all been such good friends that this change might have seemed strange enough, but Charles was too busy in his new office to notice, and Marianne gave no sign. She was as she had always been—gentle and kind and gracious, the deeper reserve which enclosed her softened by some indefinable emotion, perhaps of pity.

Latour told no more stories.

When they met, Little Nicholas felt the sombre eyes rest

on him with a look that he could not understand. He was too young to understand, and so too young to forgive. Indeed, he did not know what there was that needed forgiveness. Something had happened—he could hardly remember what—and then suddenly the vague fear and repulsion which had haunted his love for the hunchback uncle had grown big and definite. It was as though the earth had opened and the physical deformity was not a surface thing any more, but went deep, deep down into depths which made little Nicholas sick and frightened when he thought of them.

But in truth he did not think of them very often. For, like every one else the whirlwind had seized upon him and swept him off his small legs and tossed him from one feverish excitement to another. Every morning he carried his candle into the shadowy church and set it at the feet of the friendly saint, and prayed for *nos braves soldats* and the speedy destruction of the bad people. And it seemed to him that the saint smiled and nodded to him, and once even that the composed lips moved.

“Have patience, Little Nicholas!”

When he went out of the church, there were the soldiers themselves plodding through the muddy streets, bumping over the cobbles on the sombre-hued gun-carriages, clattering past at a merry trot on their well-groomed horses. And the beating of drums and the blood-stirring bugle call became a daily music.

The men were grave-faced and serene. But they smiled at Little Nicholas when he waved to them and shouted in his childish treble. He was too young to understand all that their smiles hid, and he prayed more earnestly than ever that he might grow up at once and take his share in their glorious adventure. There were times, indeed, when the

saint, had he been an ordinary person, might have become restive under Little Nicholas's insistence. He might have felt that he was being bullied and resented it. But the great thing about saints is that they are never impatient. Though they stand on pedestals, with candles burning at their feet and wear golden haloes round their heads, they have not forgotten what it was to walk among the multitude and to desire and suffer.

So that St. Nicholas smiled patiently upon his name-child and listened in unrebuking silence.

One winter's day, when Little Nicholas ran out of the church the soldiers were coming back from the unknown place whither they had marched so gaily. There were not many of them, and, though they were the same men, they were changed. On their faces, on their uniforms, on their battered gun-carriages, on their limping horses they wore marks of horror. They went on unceasingly and there was no sound of drum or call of trumpet, only hoarse words of command and the dull heavy thud of feet. They did not look at Little Nicholas as he stood on the pavement and watched them pass, and he did not call to them.

And suddenly he forgot school and ran home with panic clutching at his heels.

But even the big familiar house frightened him. It seemed to be full of strange people. In reality he knew them all save one, but they had changed like the soldiers and like the big house itself. Their faces were grey and stiff, and they did not smile at Little Nicholas when he broke into the room. On the contrary, they looked away, frowning as though they did not want to remember him.

His father and his mother were there, too; and Uncle Louis and a stranger in uniform with white hair and a gaunt, weather-beaten face. And there was little Monsieur

Destard, who had the biggest wine-cellars in all the province. They all listened to the strange officer.

Little Nicholas crept to his mother's side and she put her arm about him and drew him close. She said nothing about school. He felt that her arm trembled, and her eyes were fixed on her husband, who stood by the window staring out on to the street. Suddenly he raised his clenched fists above his head and shook them.

"Oh, God, if only I could take my rifle to go with them!" he groaned aloud. "It is my right to go! Why am I tied like a lame old dog to my post. General!—have pity!"

The officer shook his head.

"Your place is here, *Monsieur le Maire*," he said. "The townspeople chose you in fair weather to guide them. Now that the storm has broken you cannot fail them. They will need all your wisdom and courage. We leave you at your post. It is one of grave danger. Be satisfied."

Charles did not answer. His face showed the colour of wax against his black beard, and his hands shook. The officer turned to his wife with a grave bow. "And you, madame—I regret deeply we can do nothing. We cannot differentiate. The inhabitants must remain and take their chance. I know that you will be brave."

"I will try," she answered simply.

"And I?" said Latour suddenly.

He took a shambling step forward out of the shadow.

"And I—have you nothing for me, *mon Général*?"

The white-haired officer looked at him.

"No doubt you have had your orders from the bank at Paris, monsieur," he said courteously.

"Yes, I have done all that I can do. The bullion is safe. I am free. I am strong. Look at these arms. I have never been a soldier, but I could fight—I could kill—if I had a chance."

"Your spirit does you credit, monsieur," was the answer.

"That means—nothing. Because I am deformed—because I've got a hump on my back, because I am hideous to look at—I'm not fit to fight." His falsetto voice rose almost to a scream. They looked away from him as though he had made them ashamed. The officer's face was immovable.

"No doubt France will know how to use all her sons," he said.

He went towards the door, Monsieur Destard pattering at his spurred heels.

"You will return, *mon Général*?"

"Assuredly—we shall return."

"When the time comes—do not forget what I have told you. The cellar runs for a mile under the river. It is a secret. No one knows of it but me. It may be useful."

"That is certain, I shall not forget."

They went out. Charles followed, and his elder brother came last of all. He turned suddenly, shutting the door sharply behind him.

"Marianne," he said. "Listen to me."

She stood half-way across the room with Little Nicholas's hand in hers, looking at him. He was shaking from head to foot and the sweat ran down the sides of his dark face. Little Nicholas shrank behind his mother's skirts. The thought that he had once played and laughed with this terrible, hideous man was like the memory of an impossible dream.

"Louis, I must go to my husband.

"Wait—listen. You must. You can't stay here, Marianne. It is death—it may be worse than death. You know what happened at S——. Well—I am not so useless after

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all. They won't have me to fight, so be it. But there is one thing I can and will do. I can save you."

She drew herself up a little. It was so slight a movement—and yet suddenly she had grown tall and strong.

"You heard what the General said, Louis. We cannot differentiate. We must take our share."

"Our share? And is our share the same? Look at me—look at me—is my share the same as Charles's? Is my life the same? Yes—I have the same heart, the same desires, the same passions, and God made me a monster—a laughing-stock, a butt for men's jests. Yes—yes—*Monsieur le Général* may talk, but God differentiates—God differentiates!"

"Hush!" she whispered with white lips. "You are raving, Louis; I have never laughed."

"No—you have been good—merciful, pitiful. But you don't understand—if you could see into my heart, Marianne——" He had been pacing restlessly backwards and forwards across the room. He stood still now—close to her, his long, ungainly arms pressed to his sides—"——if I had been as other men you would have understood, Marianne. If I had been built straight I should have had a chance to show you. But now, at last, a chance has come. I can save you—you and Nicholas. I am going to—I must."

"The choice is not yours, Louis," she answered quietly.

In the far distance something happened. A hush seemed to hold the whole town. It was as though every one had stood still—listening, looking at each other. It happened again just the same—perhaps a little nearer—like the muffled thud of a giant's footstep.

Louis Latour picked up Little Nicholas in his arms.

"I have horses and a carriage waiting in the street behind

the bank. I have passports for all three of us. You will travel as my wife. We shall be in Paris to-morrow morning."

"No," she answered.

He did not seem to hear her. He held the struggling boy against him with a ruthless strength.

"There is no chance for anyone who stays here. Sooner or later something will happen. There will be a massacre."

"Are you a coward, Louis?"

With his free hand he caught hold of her. His face was so close to hers that she saw nothing but his frowning frenzied eyes.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do—nothing—good or evil. I have money. I have saved and saved. It's as though I had always known this would come. I've wanted to shower things upon you, load you with everything that is beautiful, that your heart desired. I love you, Marianne—you and Nicholas, because he is yours. I have loved you ever since I was a boy. I have dreamed of you and prayed for you; everything that I have done has been for you, and now——"

He was like a maniac. Things that he meant to say were stifled. But from out of black primitive depths, hidden from his own knowledge, came this torrential passion. He saw the horror on her face come and go. He saw that she was not looking at him, that even his madness could not hold her. Her eyes passed him, and he turned gasping and saw his brother standing in the open doorway.

Charles Latour had been very pale. He was flushed now. The anxieties and terrors of the last days had seemed to wither him like an icy wind. Now he was himself—vigorous and dangerous.

The two men looked at each other. The masked envy

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and contempt that had been between them all their lives stood out naked and shameless,

"You cur! You misshapen, treacherous cur!"

Latour set Little Nicholas to the ground.

"Take care! If I am misshapen I am strong enough. I could kill you with my hands."

Again in the far distance the blow fell, silencing them. They looked at one another. Suddenly that which had happened between them slipped into its place. They were aghast that they had forgotten.

Charles Latour turned his back upon his brother.

"I suppose he offered you safety as well as love, Marianne?" he said bitterly. "Perhaps even now he will have the decency to offer you the one without the other. And, God knows, I shall be glad to think you safe. It is for you to choose."

She came up to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. She was smiling, and she had never seemed to him so radiant—so serenely beautiful.

"My husband, there is no choice."

"You know what it may mean?"

"I have been proud to live with you," she answered. "I shall be proud to die with you."

Little Nicholas felt a great throb in his heart.

"And me!" he said loudly and clearly. "And me too!"

They looked at him. They laughed to see him so defiant and brave; they laughed as though death were not pounding its way over the hills, closer with every minute. Charles held out his arms, and Little Nicholas ran into them with a cry of joy. And so they stood there, holding one another against the coming enemy.

And Latour crept out like a distorted shadow. Nor did

they notice his going. Even though he had shown himself in all his hideousness, they had forgotten him.

IV

The snow fell faster and faster. It had fallen all night, and now it lay so thick on the street that even the ceaseless trampling of those unfamiliar, grey-clad men could not beat it into mud. It muffled the thud of their feet so that they passed like ghosts—grey and silent and inevitable. The whole town lay silent under its dead white pall.

Little Nicholas hid himself behind the curtains in the dining-room. There was no more school, no more riotous fun on the way home, no more forbidden games in the market place. The street had become a place of mysterious evil. One went out—and one vanished. It was like the tales of wicked enchantment in the fairy stories. And from early morning Little Nicholas had stood by the window peering through the wet panes and waiting for some wonderful thing to happen. But now it was dusk, and still that grey stream poured on and on—and nothing happened.

Little Nicholas grew tired. The twilight frightened him. The dim figures passing through the veil of snow became more terrifying in their unreality. All day no one had spoken above a whisper. People went about the house on tiptoe and wore a hushed uneasy look, as though there were some one sleeping whose waking they feared. And now the silence and the chill suspense broke upon Little Nicholas like a wave. He wanted to cry out, but the invisible terror choked him. He slipped down behind the curtain burying his face in his arms, crying silently.

The door opened. The old serving woman came first carrying candles, whose star-light fought weakly with the dank gloom. Then came a tall, strongly-built man in a

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grey cloak on which the wet snow still sparkled. He carried his cloth-covered helmet in his hand, and his face was like a face carved out of weather-stained wood. And a thrilling, frightened murmur of steel accompanied him as he moved.

Little Nicholas's father followed. He wore his badge of office, and the two men stood opposite each other with the light between them. The old woman crept out, but Little Nicholas lay motionless, holding his breath, the tears drying on his cheeks.

"Monsieur le Maire?"

Little Nicholas's father inclined his head.

"I have that honour, General."

"Good. I come from the Commander-in-Chief. He will expect you to wait upon him at the town hall within the next two hours. In the meanwhile I require from you a list of the chief men in the place."

"I shall have a list drawn up, General."

"Further, I am under the necessity of imposing the following regulations and orders upon the inhabitants." He read aloud from a printed sheet. His big voice filled the room. It was more than a voice. It was an actual presence, implacable, passionless, horrible in its conviction of power. "The infringement of these regulations will be followed by instant punishment. The penalty is death."

Little Nicholas looked at his father from behind the curtains. There was something strange about him which he could not understand. He was not like his father any more. He was different. He was smaller. There was a look in his eyes which Little Nicholas had never seen before. It was more terrifying than anything that had happened.

"The proclamation shall be given out, as you wish, General."

"You will be held responsible for whatever happens, *Monsieur le Maire*."

They bowed to each other with their terrible, formal politeness.

"I understand, General."

They went out as they had come. Once again there was silence. The candles shivered as though they had been released from a spell. Little Nicholas crept out from his hiding-place. He, too, was shivering with rage, and fear, and loneliness. He wanted to rush to some one—some one bigger and stronger than that great man in the grey cloak—and demand help and comfort. But there was no one. An icy quiet held the house. And outside the river of dim figures flowed on unceasingly.

In the draught from the half-open door a candle wavered and went out. And then it was that Little Nicholas remembered. He thought of the saint standing alone and sorrowful in the darkness of his niche, waiting for the light that never came. He remembered all the curé had said of the wonderful things the saint had done for those who loved and trusted him. And now that the time had come to prove his love and trust he had forgotten.

Little Nicholas took down the dead candle from its socket. It was all so clear to him now that he did not hesitate. Even when he had crept down the dark stairs and the outer door had closed heavily and menacingly behind him he was not frightened. The river had run dry at last. The streets were empty, and the snow hurried down to cover the traces of those myriad feet. Little Nicholas ran, hatless, coatless, the candle hidden safely beneath his blouse.

When he had lit his candle he would look up into the benign, half-smiling face and pray aloud:

"Please, Saint Nicholas, drive the bad people away and grant that my father may never look like that any more."

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So he came to the church. It stood out like a white ghost in the snow-drenched darkness. The doors were wide open, and within was a blaze of light and the sound of voices. Little Nicholas crept up the steps. He stood trembling on the threshold, his candle clasped in his frozen fingers. At first he was dazzled, and then it was like a nightmare. There were men lying on the dim altar steps, men sleeping, men drinking. Under the altar lamp a group of shadows rattled a dice box, and a hoarse baritone sang drowsily:—

“Marianne, Marianne, Mariannetta.

Wenn ich das Mädchen hätte.”

Arms were piled up neatly the length of the solemn aisle and a cloth-covered helmet sat jauntily on the saint's halo.

A figure came up to Nicholas out of the darkness and dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder, and shook him with a rough playfulness. A voice spoke to him in a language that he did not understand.

“*Na-Junge, was willst du?*”

Little Nicholas could not speak. The sobs choked him, the candle slipped from his fingers and dropped into the thick snow. The soldier prodded him teasingly with the butt end of his rifle. “*Mach' dass d' fort kommst, Dummechen. Hier hast d' nix zu mache'.*”

Then Little Nicholas did a strange, terrible thing. It was as though the outrage to his saint had pricked an abscess which all day had long been gathering and aching. He charged headlong at the towering figure. He struck out wildly with his fists. The man, taken by surprise, stepped back and slipped on the wet snow and fell. Little Nicholas did not wait. He turned and went down the steps. Behind him he heard voices and hurrying steps, and he ran faster with sobs of fear and anger tearing at his throat. And at the corner of the street, just when he knew it was all

over, and that they would kill him, a strong arm caught hold of him, and he was carried into a doorway and held tightly whilst a dozen figures went sprawling past into the darkness. They waited until the last sound of the pursuit had died away, and then Latour set the boy on his feet. He did it gently, almost as though he apologised for touching him.

"What was it, Nicholas? What happened? What had you done?"

He did not wait for an answer.

They turned out of the doorway, and, keeping to the shadow, hurried homewards. Nicholas clung to his uncle's hand. He had forgotten that he was so ugly, and so wicked, and even that he had been an old friend and playfellow. But he was a comrade. He was an enemy of those others; he would feel the hurt they had done to all that Nicholas loved.

"I wanted—I wanted to take a candle——" he panted.

"I wanted to ask Saint Nicholas—and they were there and they had put a helmet on his head. He looked so sad. Shan't I ever take him a candle again?"

"Yes, I promise you, soon."

"And they were laughing. And I hit one of them. I wasn't frightened. You see I'm to be like father, and he's not frightened. He never could be, could he?"

"No, never."

Little Nicholas drew a sigh of content.

"I knew. So I hit him. I hate them. Every night I ask God to send them away and punish them. I don't understand. Doesn't God hear?"

"Oh, yes, He hears. But you see, He has made a law. Everything that is good and true has to suffer and die and go down into the grave before it can really live. Until we understand that we understand nothing. But it is hard."

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He lifted Nicholas in his arms again so that they could go faster. And Little Nicholas clung to him and felt more comforted, because although he did not understand, he knew that at least there *was* an answer. But he did not know how the man who carried him trembled at his touch.

V

They had reached the bottom of a flight of stone steps, and Monsieur Destard stopped and lifted the lantern above his head, throwing his light on to the faces of the little group of uniformed men behind him. The light could penetrate no further. It beat feebly against a wall of blackness beyond which Monsieur Destard's whisper echoed mysteriously, travelling into the distance like a hurrying, frightened ghost.

"You know your way now, Messieurs. And you see I have not exaggerated. There is room for a regiment in this vault alone, and at night we could hide several companies overhead in the warehouse until all your men are assembled. At eleven o'clock on the twenty-fourth we shall expect you."

"There will be a joint attack," he said calmly. "We shall take them on all sides, and a blow in the heart of the town like this will finish them. At the same time,"—he looked at the old wine-cellar fixedly for a moment, and then his eyes passed on to Charles Latour standing on the edge of the shadow—"they are certain to do their worst first. The civilian population will suffer and your household most of all, Monsieur Destard."

"I am a lonely old man," Destard answered, smiling. "They are welcome."

"And you, *Monsieur le Maire*?"

Charles started a little.

"I—I answer for the population, naturally, Colonel."

"Then all is settled. They suspect nothing? Your meeting here might seem strange."

Destard laughed.

"It is my birthday. Every one knows I have asked a few friends to celebrate. They despise us so they think it quite natural that Frenchmen feast whilst their country suffers. Their knowledge of us is useful—the madness which the gods send before they destroy."

"Then good-night. To the twenty-fourth!"

"We shall celebrate victory with Christmas, Messieurs!"

The officers saluted and turned back. Destard waited till the eye of their electric torch had winked itself out, then he nodded to Charles and led the way up the steps. The trap-door opened in response to a knock, and the two men climbed out on to the hearth of Destard's dining-room. The long table was spread and laden with what good things the town could provide in these days. There was even semblance of gaiety, for the children, who had been brought too, for safety, prattled gaily and ate joyfully. But the men and women sat silent, with white, stiff faces, not touching the food before them.

Charles Latour closed down the trap-door and then slipped the concealing boards into their place.

"It's all settled," he said. "On the night of the twenty-fourth there will be a double attack and——" He stopped grown suddenly aware that his brother was standing opposite him. "You here!" he said almost inaudibly.

Latour nodded. The eyes of the two men met in an encounter so deadly that for a moment all else was forgotten. In the silence Little Nicholas's voice rang out clearly.

"And on Christmas Day I shall take all the candles I can carry—to make up. My Uncle Louis promised—you did, didn't you, Uncle Louis?"

Marianne Latour half rose, her hand held out.

"Charles," she pleaded "Wait—not now."

He interrupted her. The lips under the black moustache were white and twisted with scorn.

"If you were not a blackguard born you would have had the decency to keep away, Louis."

"I came to warn you." The hunchback's thin voice steadied desperately. He had winced and now he seemed to be fighting to control himself. "I have heard—*they* suspect."

"It is impossible. You imagine things—or invent them. If you are afraid, keep out of it—keep away from here."

"I did not come because I love you, my brother."

"I know that. I know whom you think you love. I know whom you would be glad to see dead. And if you were not what you are, you would not dare to face me now——"

"I tell you—they are on their way."

"And I tell you, you are a treacherous coward. You would have betrayed my honour—you would betray others."

"Take care—mind yourself."

They held him back. He was like a madman—like an ugly animal that has been goaded into fury. There was froth on his lips. "Mind yourself! Mind yourself!" he repeated screaming.

The old wine-seller stood between them.

"Hush, for God's sake, messieurs. This is no time—listen."

On that instant they were struck motionless, and the children's frightened voices died away like a breath of wind. For outside in the street they had heard footsteps—a word of command, the sharp grounding of arms. And now a bell pealed.

Monsieur Destard sprang nimbly on to the hearth, and stood there, smoking, with his thumbs in his arm-holes.

"Come now—enjoy yourselves! Quick!"

They awoke as from a stupor. They began to laugh and talk and eat. Charles took out a cigarette and Latour tried to hold a match for him. But his hand shook, and Charles took the light from him with a little, meaning smile. The flame burnt up straight and steady. Even then people noticed. It marked the difference between the two men. Afterwards they remembered and spoke about it.

The footsteps came across the hall.

The door opened, and on either side of the big grey-cloaked man who entered, two soldiers posted themselves. Their fixed bayonets shone faintly, and their faces were empty shadows under their spiked helmets.

"To what do we owe this honour?" Monsieur Destard asked sarcastically. "Is it not possible to celebrate even one's birthday undisturbed?"

"We have received certain information," the officer answered, "by which we are led to fear that the population has not benefited by the experience of others. It is, therefore, necessary that we should demand hostages—important hostages. Monsieur Charles Latour, *Maire*."

Charles flicked the ash of his cigarette with a steady finger.

"At your service."

"Monsieur Louis Latour, *banquier*——"

The two brothers ranged themselves side by side. The soldiers moved forward in obedience to a gesture.

"Escort these two men to the town hall. If there is any attempt to rescue, you have your orders. Messieurs, if your townspeople behave themselves you have nothing to fear. But I warn you—and I suggest that your friends

here make the warning public—that at the first sound of disorder you will be shot instantly. I give you a moment to say anything you wish to say.”

It was very still. They could not pretend now. The little company looked at the two men. They were so different that it was difficult to believe that the same death was coming to them both. Charles Latour shook hands with them all. He was smiling and his hand was quite steady. They had never seen him so handsome, so brave, so calm.

“Many happy returns of the day, Monsieur Destard!”

They all knew what he meant.

Marianne Latour came last of all.

She lifted Little Nicholas to his father's shoulder and they kissed each other, gravely, as though each kiss had been a sacrament.

“We shall be proud—Nicholas and I—all our lives,” she whispered.

Latour heard the whisper. He stood quite alone and forgotten. They had shaken hands with him, but perfunctorily, as one pays respect to the passing funeral of some one unloved and unknown. Now Marianne turned to him. The shadow of dislike and distrust faded from her dimmed eyes.

“Good-bye, Louis.”

“Good-bye, Marianne.”

“Let us hope that it is only *au revoir*,” said the officer, laughing significantly.

Latour looked at Little Nicholas standing grave-faced by his mother's side. He wanted to say something—to them both—but he was tongue-tied, and the words dropped back unspoken into his heart. He nodded stupidly and went out at his brother's heels—shambling with bent head, his long arms hanging limp at his side.

Even then they noticed his shadow—distorted, ape-like—gliding along the wall.

VI

He thought:

"To-morrow, perhaps Saint Nicholas will have his candles."

He smiled to himself. He was tired but content as is a man who has come to the end of a long arduous journey. Nobody had known how much he had suffered on the way, and no one would ever know how glad he was to rest. There had been so much storm and passion and ugliness, so many bitter and sullen days, so many torturing desires. And now all was still and quiet. It was as though the darkness in his heart had poured out like a released flood. It engulfed his body—soon it would engulf him for ever—but his heart was full of a light in which all things were clear and beautiful.

He thought how strange it was that his love for Marianne had shown itself to her as something base and loathsome. For when he had carried it secretly in his own breast it had been like a precious stone that he could take out of its hiding-place and wonder at without shame. It seemed to him now that when he had tried to show it to her his poor body had stood in the way like a distorting mirror, twisting his treasure into grotesque hatefulness.

But in a few hours his body would not stand in the way any more. It would have ceased to matter. Nothing would remain but the reality—freed of its piteous disguise. Even now the darkness hid his ugliness so that it could not hurt him. He was free of it at last.

"If only I could have told her," he thought. "If only I could have done something to make her understand, to atone."

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The clock in the town hall belfry overhead clanged out ten strokes. He counted them anxiously, for in the pitch darkness of their prison they were the only warning. A night and day had passed, and only once had the door swung open and then the same heavy-built officer had stood on the threshold whilst a soldier flashed a lantern in their faces. He had spoken courteously.

"After all, messieurs, one must be reasonable. Any attempt on the part of the inhabitants to aid their friends outside the town can only end in disaster. You, *Monsieur le Maire*, bear a great responsibility. Come, could we not unite in this matter? If you would give us some idea, an opportunity to prevent such a tragedy occurring—not only would you be absolved, but we give you our word that no one will suffer—no one. We shall take preventive measures only."

Latour had laughed openly, and Charles had sat with his face buried in his hands as though he had not heard. The officer had shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well. Think it over. If you change your minds you need only rap at the door—I shall be informed."

Then the door closed again.

Somehow that incident had now changed everything. The last shred of envy and hatred which had suffocated his brother's love had been torn away. He saw Charles as Marianne saw him. He had a right to all that success and honour. God had given him a straight body and a straight fine soul. It was so easy and natural to love him. Love and honour were his heritage.

He stretched out a hand into the darkness.

"Charles!" he faintly whispered.

It was the first word that had passed between them.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Did you hear the clock? It struck ten. In an hour's time it will all be over."

"No doubt; yes—all over."

"It will be our Christmas gift to France. To-morrow Little Nicholas will take his candles to the church."

"Perhaps."

Latour's groping hand touched his brother's arm.

"You are afraid for them. There is no need. Destard will take his precautions. The blow will fall so suddenly—they will have no time."

"Time to shoot us!"

"Yes. What does that matter? It is hard, but sooner or later we must die."

Charles Latour freed himself with a violent movement.

"Curse you! Who are you to talk? What do you leave behind? nothing—no one. It is easy for you. But for me—it was only beginning. I should have gone far—they said so—my life was valuable, and now——"

"Didn't you know what she said? 'We shall be proud, Nicholas and I, all our lives.' Could you earn anything greater than that? So long as the town stands, men and women will speak reverently of you."

"Shall I be there to hear them? What is praise or blame to the dead? Good God! in another hour——"

The voice, unfamiliar and terrible, broke off. Latour crept closer. He was afraid now with a fear that he could not name. It was as though the earth was cracking under him.

"Charles! we have only a few minutes. I want to say something—to ask your forgiveness. I loved Marianne, I loved Nicholas. I hated and envied you. I felt as though you had wronged me—cheated me of my birthright. I was blind—unjust. You had earned all that came to you. You

deserved their love. Men turn naturally to what is fine and brave and true. I, too, am proud, my brother. I could have killed, now I would give my life."

Charles Latour stumbled violently to his feet. It was as though he had not heard.

"It's mad," he whispered; "mad. It's as that man said—there will be a massacre—horrible, useless. We shall have given our lives for nothing. I am responsible. They will keep their word—it's my duty."

"Where are you going?"

"I—I won't die like this——" the voice was shrill and broken like a panic-stricken child's. "I won't. In the field I could have faced it, not here, like a rat in a trap—in cold blood. Damn this darkness. I can't bear it."

"Charles, you're ill, you're beside yourself. Death is nothing—a pin-prick. And they're so proud."

"What do I care? Out of my way. I tell you it is my duty to prevent bloodshed—useless bloodshed. I won't die."

They faced each other in the darkness. But the darkness did not hide them. It stripped them naked.

"Are you afraid?"

"And if I am? Did I say I was a hero? How can I help what they thought—what I thought? No one can tell till he's tried. Besides it's common sense."

"Where are you going?"

There was no answer. Latour felt his way along the wall. They came against each other suddenly. One smothered exclamation of dismay and they closed. Latour's ape-like hands had gone straight to his brother's throat, choking the cry for help, and they went down together, rolling over and over, with no sound but the gasp of

their tortured lungs and the shuffle of their struggling bodies.

The first stroke of the *Mairie* bell broke like a heavy sea on the walls of their prison. Wave succeeded wave, and with the gathering storm there mingled the boom of distant guns, the staccato rattle of infantry fire playing like lightning on a black sky, men's voices, running footsteps that came nearer, hesitated, and passed on.

Cheering!

Latour's hands slipped from his brother's throat.

"I had to," he whispered sobbingly. "I had to—they were too proud."

He began to stretch out his brother's fine limbs and to compose his hands over the quiet breast. Then he stood up, waiting for the door to open—for the end.

And so they found the two brothers when they came to set them free. The face of Charles Latour was full of a noble peace. They led Louis away from him out into the dimly-lit hall of the *Mairie*. There was blood on his hands, and he seemed more bent and twisted than ever.

Marianne stood on the edge of the silent crowd. She looked at him, without hatred, wondering, as though it puzzled her that God should have made anything so evil. And he looked back at her for a last time. He did not try to speak; he did not want her to understand. For something greater than words had been given him.

"Yes, I killed him," he said. "You see, I lost my nerve. I wanted to betray the plans. We fought and I was the stronger. But I was not in time."

They covered Charles with the tricolour, and his brother they led out into the cold, grey Christmas morning. They set his misshapen back to the wall, for justice moves swiftly for a traitor.

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"An ugly devil!" they said, as they shovelled the earth into the nameless grave. "Strange that they should have been brothers."

And in the same hour, Marianne and Nicholas carried their candles into the ransomed church. Their hearts were strong with pride and victory. They prayed together for the souls of all brave men.

"And grant that I may grow up to-morrow," little Nicholas prayed secretly, "and be like my father!"

And from amidst the golden light of his candles the saint smiled down upon him in patient tenderness.

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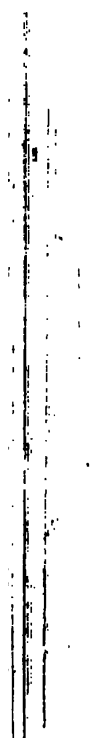
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